

[Back to Story - Help](#)

## Ecological Cars Highlight Tokyo Auto Show

**AP** Associated Press

By YURI KAGEYAMA, AP Business Writer

Wed Oct 19, 8:12 PM ET

The usually futuristic "concept cars" at the Tokyo auto show are taking on an all-too-real immediacy this year amid soaring oil prices, with ecologically-friendly autos grabbing the limelight.

The overriding message at the Tokyo Motor Show, opening Saturday to the public, is that gas-guzzlers must make way for green cars that pollute less and rely less on shrinking supplies of fossil fuels.

Reporters got a preview Wednesday of the show's offerings of experimental ecological cars galore, including a vehicle that switches back and forth between an electric motor and a hydrogen-powered engine from Mazda Motor Corp. and a fuel cell small car from Suzuki Motor Corp.

Auto officials say it's urgent to develop cars that run on fuels other than gasoline. Crude oil prices have doubled over the last five years as the global oil supply struggles to keep up with ballooning demand.

"We could be facing a crisis in which the oil supply dries up," says Mitsuru Honma of Sanyo Electric Co., which supplies batteries for Ford Motor Co.'s hybrid vehicles.

Hybrid vehicles deliver a cleaner ride and reduce greenhouse emissions by switching back and forth between different powertrains, such as an electric motor and gasoline engine.

Sanyo, which has a booth at the show, estimates annual production of hybrid vehicles may increase to 3 million worldwide by 2010, or 7 percent of the 44 million passenger-car market. Annual hybrid production now totals less than half a million.

Toyota Motor Corp., the first automaker to sell a commercially mass-produced hybrid with its Prius in 1997, is showing an even more advanced hybrid called Fine-X, which is powered by an electric battery and a pollution-free hydrogen fuel cell.

The hydrogen, stored in a fuel tank, combines with oxygen in the air to form water clean enough to drink.

Also, the Fine-X has wheels that can swivel at a sharp angle to the side to allow for tight U-turns and easy parallel parking.

General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co. also had booths at the show, but GM Chief Executive Rick Wagoner stayed home to announce a revival plan at the world's biggest automaker, which has lost nearly \$3 billion in the first three quarters.

GM also was pushing its technological prowess, displaying its collaboration in fuel cells with Japanese partner Suzuki that adapted GM's technology for the small car, Suzuki's specialty.

The driver's seat in Suzuki's Ionis moves from side to side as well as to the center to allow for more room when driving alone.

Like other fuel cell cars at the show, the Ionis is roomier than conventional cars because fuel cells don't need space for an engine and other usual mechanical parts.

"We don't see this as a question of whether. We see it as a question of when," Larry Burns, GM Vice President in charge of research and development, said of the impending switch from gas engines to fuel cells.

Burns said GM plans to develop a fuel cell system that will be competitive with gasoline engines in performance by 2010, although it may take more time to mass produce them because of the lack of hydrogen-fueling stations and other changes needed before they can become practical.

GM is displaying its Sequel fuel-cell concept vehicle, first shown at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit in January. Burns said the several fuel cell concept vehicles on show in Tokyo were inspired by GM.

"I hope you can see the similarity," he said. "Any concept you see that has electric wheel motors and that has a flat-floor chassis really you could argue are derivatives of some of the early ideas that GM shared with the world."

Fuel cell vehicles remain extremely expensive and are now only available for leasing, mostly by government organizations. Skeptics say 2010 is still too early for fuel cell vehicles — or even hybrids — to catch on in significant numbers.

"We don't know where the markets are going," said Carlos Ghosn, who heads both Japanese automaker Nissan Motor Co. and its French partner Renault SA. "We have to observe what's going down, see the trends, look at every vibration on the market, prepare the technology and jump when consumers start to think one way or the other."

At his presentation, Ghosn showed off the GT-R Proto, a Nissan sports car set to go on sale in 2007 that clearly communicated mechanical muscle more than kindness to the environment.

Still, in another corner of the show, Honda Motor Co. displayed its FCX fuel cell concept, designed to highlight other technology such as turning on car audio and air conditioning by simply looking at icons on a dashboard.

"It's our proposal for the future," said Executive Chief Engineer Yozo Kami, while declining to say when a car like that might go on sale. "But it's not a complete fantasy."

---

Copyright © 2005 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in the AP News report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of The Associated Press.

Copyright © 2005 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved.

[Questions or Comments](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Copyright/IP Policy](#) - [Ad Feedback](#)