

## **Nissan Plans Electric Car in U.S. by '10**

*Bill Vlasic*

The Nissan Motor Company plans to sell an electric car in the United States and Japan by 2010, raising the stakes in the race to develop environmentally friendly vehicles.

The commitment — expected to be announced Tuesday by Nissan's chief executive, Carlos Ghosn — will be the first by a major automaker to bring a zero-emission vehicle to the American market. Nissan also expects to sell a lineup of electric vehicles globally by 2012.

In an interview Monday, Mr. Ghosn said Nissan decided to accelerate development of battery-powered vehicles because of high gasoline prices and environmental concerns, not just because of the need to meet stricter fuel-economy standards.

"What we are seeing is that the shifts coming from the markets are more powerful than what regulators are doing," he said.

Mr. Ghosn said Nissan envisioned a broad range of electric vehicles, starting with small cars, and adding: "It's not only about a small city car or a small minivan. It can also be about a small commercial vehicle and a small crossover."

Mr. Ghosn was not always enthusiastic about alternative-fuel technology. In a 2005 speech to the National Automobile Dealers Association, he called gas-electric hybrids "niche products" useful only to meet strict fuel-economy and emission standards in states like California.

"It wasn't long ago that Carlos Ghosn was a big naysayer about the role of electric vehicles," said John O'Dell, senior editor at the auto Web site GreenCarAdvisor.com. "Obviously, something has opened his eyes."

Other automakers like Mitsubishi Motors and Fuji Heavy Industries are testing versions of electric cars, and General Motors and Toyota are working on battery-powered vehicles that have small gasoline engines for recharging. G.M. plans to start producing the Chevrolet Volt in 2010, while Toyota expects to offer a similar, so-called "plug-in" hybrid around the same time.

But Nissan, which a decade ago was on the brink of bankruptcy, is the first manufacturer to say it will sell mass market, all-electric vehicles worldwide. The zero emissions refers to those from the car's tailpipe and not those from the production of electricity used to power the car.

Still, Mr. O'Dell said: "Nissan is upping the ante tremendously. They are the first to put it on the line and say we're going to have an all-electric vehicle for a certain market by a certain date."

Mr. Ghosn declined to disclose details of the electric products and said initial quantities would be small. "We're talking about hundreds of vehicles first," he said.

But he said that the company was determined to achieve "zero-emission-vehicle leadership."

With customers in emerging markets like China and India clamoring for cars, the industry has a responsibility to invest in the cleanest vehicles possible, he said, adding, "The question is how we participate in the growth of emerging markets, while doing it in a way that is not in contradiction with the fact that a lot of people are sensitive to the emission levels and the preservation of the planet."

Early this year, Nissan and its French alliance partner, Renault, signed a deal with the California-based Project Better Place to produce electric cars for sale in Israel and Denmark.

Renault will provide the cars and Nissan will supply lithium-ion battery packs. Mr. Ghosn, who also serves as chief executive of Renault, said the Israeli government would encourage sales of electric cars by sharply cutting taxes to levels below those on gasoline-powered vehicles.

"We would never have done this if the Israeli government was not encouraging it," he said. "Whoever puts the most incentive on the table is going to get the technology first."

The goal to sell electric vehicles is part of a new five-year business plan, called Nissan GT 2012, also to be announced Tuesday. It contains goals that are among the most ambitious set by Mr. Ghosn since he took the reins at Nissan in 1999.

In previous plans, Mr. Ghosn set strict targets for cost cuts, profit and return on investments to turn around the company's lagging fortunes.

But now Nissan is healthier. It is expected to report a profit in the most recent fiscal year of \$4.1 billion.

The next five years, Mr. Ghosn said, would focus on growth and trust. "Trust is about sustainability," he said. "It's about return, it's about loyalty. In our industry, the companies that are performing best are the ones that have established a high level of trust with the different stakeholders."

The goals also call for Nissan to match the best industry standards in vehicle quality and to increase its revenue by an average of 5 percent each year.

The company plans to introduce 60 models worldwide by 2012. Several new products are planned for the United States market, including a new Maxima sedan, the Cube small car and a new version of the Z-family sports cars.

Renault and Nissan have also joined with an Indian carmaker, Bajaj Auto, to produce a \$2,500 car by 2011.

The new business plan and electric-car pledge represent a comeback effort of sorts for Mr. Ghosn, whose status as an industry superstar was tarnished in an aborted effort to extend the Nissan-Renault alliance to General Motors in 2006.

The alliance talks were spurred by the investor Kirk Kerkorian, who was then a major G.M. shareholder. Though Mr. Ghosn was willing to conclude a deal, G.M. management rebuffed him.

Nissan recently struck joint ventures with the now-private Chrysler to build vehicles in each other's plants, but Mr. Ghosn played down the chances of bringing the American automaker as a full partner into the Nissan-Renault alliance.

"We're not in a hurry," he said, "but if we feel there is a good opportunity for us to add a North American partner, we need to take it seriously. For now, we have to be very cautious."

But Nissan is being more aggressive about its electric-car efforts. Mr. Ghosn declined to say how much an electric vehicle would cost, but stressed that they would be affordable and comparable with other vehicles in the marketplace.

"We are not interested in some 'Stars Wars' prototype," he said, "but in really bringing a mass market product that everybody can buy. It's really a new chapter in the life of this industry."

He said that as many as 10 million of the 69 million vehicles produced each year worldwide could ultimately be electric-powered, with a concentration in urban areas. "We think that cars sold in cities are the obvious first starting point," he said.

Electric cars are typically recharged by plugging the vehicle into an electrical outlet at home or elsewhere overnight. But previous attempts at electric vehicles were hampered by the length

of time needed to recharge the battery, and the limited distances the cars could travel on a single charge.

How customers will respond to a mass market electric car is still unknown, Mr. O'Dell said. Concerns about driving range and reliability, he said, would generate a "healthy skepticism."

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