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Happy Thanksgiving**Minutia****NEXT ISSUE:****Is the Electric Car Really Green?****November 28, 2008**

By Esther Schultz

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With the rising price of gas there has never been a more attractive time to invest in a fuel-efficient vehicle. And it shows. Nowadays you can't swing a cat in a parking lot without hitting at least a dozen Prius'. And there's ongoing pressure to develop an electric car that will appeal to the masses. But not everyone is convinced that these so-called "zero emissions" vehicles are really as green as they are made out to be.

What's Out There?

There are three main types of alternative energy vehicles.

The most popular - the hybrid vehicle - gets most of its power from an internal-combustion engine but also has an electric motor which runs on batteries that are recharged by the engine.

In the pipeline is the plug-in hybrid vehicle. This is a hybrid that can be plugged in to charge its batteries allowing it to make shorter trips entirely on electric power.

Then there is the electric vehicle which is powered by battery energy alone.

The batteries of all three types of vehicle use the kinetic energy created while braking to recharge. Some hybrids also make use of the combustion engine to generate electricity by spinning an electrical generator to recharge the battery or power an electric motor directly.

Alternative Energy Sources

Although it is readily apparent that hybrid vehicles still have some dependence on oil, the electric car seems to be the perfect example of good use of alternative energy. Many people hear the term "alternative energy" and assume it must be a good thing. But somewhere along the line there is usually a cost, it is often just hidden - out of sight, out of mind.

For alternative energy to be a good thing, it should (a) help to lessen our oil-dependence and (b) be better for the environment than traditional energy methods. So do electric and hybrid vehicles fulfill those criteria?

Both electric and hybrid vehicles (the former far more than the latter) help to lessen our dependency on oil. So the real question is - are they better for the environment than traditional fuel-run vehicles?

The Controversy



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The first stumbling block for electric vehicles is that electricity does not appear from thin air. It has to be generated. Generators have to be fueled by something. Usually they are fueled by coal, oil, diesel or heat from a nuclear power plant. So even if your electric vehicle zips along the street with no emissions, the fuel has simply been burned elsewhere.

The second problem for electric cars is that gas is a very efficient way to run a vehicle. A gallon of gas will go a long way. However, when using fuel to make electricity, there is a lot of waste. Therefore that same gallon of gas won't go nearly as far in an electric car. So the argument goes that electric vehicles actually burn more fuel than gas-run vehicles.

Hybrid cars have caused huge controversy over the environmental impact of producing and disposing the batteries within them. It is said that the negative environmental effect of producing the batteries outweighs the positive effect of driving a hybrid vehicle. There is also the additional issue of the weight of the batteries making the car less efficient, thereby using even more fuel.

Are Electric and Hybrid Cars Worth It?

So is it really worth driving an electric or hybrid car? Here are some good reasons to switch despite the arguments against:

1. Removing pollution at street level is one great reason to switch. Imagine the views across Los Angeles without that layer of smog!
2. Even if the energy source used is ultimately fossil fuel, it is far easier to install and police emission controls on large power plants than on millions of vehicles.
3. It has been shown that the efficiency of electric and hybrid vehicles and large power plants decrease carbon emissions overall despite the fact that most of the power comes from burning coal (The Cleanest Cars: Well-To-Wheels Emissions Comparisons, updated May 2008 by Sherry Boschert).
4. Whereas a gas-fueled vehicle has heavy energy losses while waiting in traffic and braking, electric vehicles don't have any losses while stationary and hybrids have very few (they usually switch to electric at a standstill), and both recharge their batteries when braking.

So what is the answer to this heated debate? The jury's still out. Maybe car companies will come up with yet another option. In the meantime, perhaps we should all convert our cars to run on waste vegetable oil. We'd just have to get used to the constant aroma of French fries!

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