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Hydrogen-cell cars turn heads

Partnership aims to bring vehicles to general market

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Could it be the vehicle of the future -- or at least one of them?

A group called the California Fuel Cell Partnership -- a coalition of automakers, energy companies and government agencies -- hopes to bring hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles to the general market in a few years.

The group has one of its prototypes on display this week at the National Fire Protection Association's World Safety Conference & Exposition at the Orange County Convention Center. The annual event, which runs through Thursday, is expected to draw about 5,000 visitors.

The prototype car, a Ford Focus, runs on compressed hydrogen gas that, when combined with oxygen, produces electricity that powers the vehicle's electric motor.

"We're working toward the future," said Jennifer Hamilton, a safety officer for the partnership. "It could be 10 to 15 years before it hits the market."

The cost of hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles likely will be comparable to conventional vehicles, Hamilton said.

She didn't know how much it might cost to fill the car's hydrogen tank, although the idea is to make it less expensive than driving a conventional vehicle.

Currently, the fuel-cell cars' tanks hold 2 to 5 kilograms of hydrogen -- getting about 50 miles per kilogram. Program officials expect hydrogen will be available to motorists in the retail market as soon as 2010, and expect the price per kilogram to be about the same as the price of a gallon of gasoline.

However, a challenge is the vehicles now can travel only 100 to 250 miles on a tank of hydrogen, while many Americans expect cars to be able to go about 300 miles on a full tank. Another challenge is getting hydrogen refueling stations established.

But the benefits are that hydrogen is relatively abundant, and it produces virtually no air pollution. Water is the only tailpipe emission from the vehicles, according to the partnership.

In California, there are about 135 hydrogen fuel-cell cars and buses on the road, with about 22 hydrogen fueling stations in operation, according to the partnership.

In Florida, the Ford Motor Co. currently is testing five hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles, but they are not for sale.

"The technology is solid, but we figure it will take another eight to 10 years before the technology is financially viable for consumers to purchase," said John Painter, Ford's Florida site manager for the project.

Fire-safe cigarettes

Also at this week's conference, organizers talked about the campaign for "fire-safe" cigarettes, which are designed to extinguish themselves when left unattended.

The special cigarettes are intended to cut down on accidental fires, and related deaths and injuries.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, which has started a campaign to promote fire-safe cigarettes, conventional cigarettes are the leading cause of fire-related deaths in the nation, killing 700 to 900 people a year.

During a panel discussion, Andrew McGuire of the San Francisco General Hospital Trauma Center said the tobacco industry has long resisted efforts to promote fire-safe cigarettes. About 44.5 million people smoke nationwide, he said.

Still, the campaign has made progress in recent years, as California, Illinois, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont and Canada have passed laws mandating fire-safe cigarettes in those jurisdictions.

McGuire said fire-safe cigarettes are not foolproof, but they are less likely to ignite a fire in cases of carelessness.

He said the campaign's goal is to get legislation for fire-safe cigarettes introduced in every state, given there seems to be less chance of having federal officials pass a nationwide law.

"A way to bypass all that foolishness would be to get cigarette companies to do it voluntarily, but I decided years ago not to hold my breath for that," McGuire said.

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