

Calgary Herald

Time is right for electric-car boom: industry experts

BY MIKE DE SOUZA JANUARY 3, 2009



An electric cable is connected to the new Cooper Mini E, electric version of the Mini, presented in Berlin on November 25, 2008.

Photograph by : AFP/Getty Images

OTTAWA — Plug-in electric cars can make a breakthrough into the North American market within the next decade as the economy emerges from its current slowdown, says the head of an industry-led panel advising the Harper government.

The task force, which includes auto manufacturers General Motors and Ford, says that up to 15 per cent of new cars on the road could be plug-in vehicles within the next decade. The target is part of the group's new vision statement which triples a previous goal of five per cent from last summer.

"I think it's a lot of common sense with a little bit of a push, and personally I think we can do better if we all pull together," said **Michael Elwood**, who is chairing Canada's Electric Vehicle Technology Road Map group. "I think there's a lot of brilliant people in this country."

Elwood, who is also vice-president marketing at **Azure Dynamics**, an electric and hybrid vehicle company, said the key is getting the industry to focus on making better batteries and energy storage, instead of the old internal combustion engines. He said that the big North American companies which participated in the discussions, GM and Ford, are also warming up to the new technologies.

"There was a lot of dialogue about it and I've got to say that the representatives from both those companies were amazing in the process," said Elwood.

In a recent interview, a Canadian industry representative said that the big automakers are already in the midst of "the biggest revolutionary technology turnaround in its history," but warned that economic factors such as the fluctuating price of gasoline at the pumps and consumer demand could affect progress in the coming years.

“Probably one of the worst nightmares would be to bring forward this technology in a low-energy-cost environment,” said Mark Nantais, president of the Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers Association of Canada.

The Harper government was expected to introduce new fuel economy or tailpipe pollution standards for cars last fall, but has not yet delivered the regulations. Nantais said the Canadian industry is also watching for details to emerge about new standards in the U.S., where the state of California is battling the federal government in court to introduce standards that would reduce tailpipe emissions in new cars by 30 per cent below 1990 levels by 2016.

Elwood said the task force’s vision statement was revised in recent months because of the evolving economic situation as well as the election of Barack Obama in the U.S., who has pledged to make investments in clean technologies as a key part of his economic policies.

The new plug-in vehicles would cost no more over their life-cycles than their internal combustion engine counterparts, and would also be expected to exceed the comfort and performance of current vehicles, according to the task force’s new vision statement.

A spokesperson from Natural Resources Canada said the government would complete a report in the next year based on the recommendations of the industry-led group as part of an effort “to bring electric vehicles to consumers faster.”

mdesouza@canwest.com

© Copyright (c) Canwest News Service

<http://www.calgaryherald.com/business/Time+right+electric+boom+industry+experts/1138967/story.html>