

Automakers respond to market

by *The Detroit News*

The Los Angeles Auto Show is a green affair like none other. Every automaker in attendance is promoting its environmentally friendly products. What's caught some off guard, however, is the fact that the companies leading the charge this year are from Detroit.

General Motors Corp. has three of the five nominees for Green Car of the Year (the 2008 Chevrolet Malibu hybrid, the Chevrolet Tahoe hybrid and the Saturn Aura hybrid); Ford's Mazda division has one, the Mazda Tribute gasoline-electric hybrid. Nissan is the lone Asian automaker vying for the greenest machine in California with its Altima hybrid.

Toyota has made a splash with its Prius, and Honda will roll out a zero-emission hydrogen fuel-cell car next year. But the Big Three domestic producers have also moved into the hybrid arena and applied it to products that many consumers want to buy, building the technology into the popular big trucks and SUVs.

In doing so, they've increased the fuel efficiency of the Tahoe, for example, by as much as 25 percent despite adding nearly 400 pounds with the new dual power train.

It may make environmentalists chafe to see the hated SUVs gain green cred. But Detroit understands that American consumers don't want to drive the tiny matchboxes the environmentalists want to squeeze them into. Hopefully, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi make a trip to the Los Angeles Convention center to see the domestic offerings first-hand. Both politicians want to hamstring automakers either by imposing state-specific regulations or industrywide mandates that would significantly hinder their turnaround efforts and drastically reduce consumer choices.

What the critics also will see are the other fuel efficient products that Ford, GM and Chrysler sell across the country. The four-cylinder Chrysler Sebring gets at least 30 miles per gallon, as does the Ford Focus and Chevy Aveo5, to name a few of the nearly 30 domestic vehicles that meet or eclipse that benchmark.

The fuel efficiency improvements and placement of new and advanced technology in different classes of vehicles shows that when guided by the market and not onerous government regulations, the domestic automakers respond.

Reprinted from The Detroit News - CNS

