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Honda makes first hydrogen cars



Honda's president Takeo Fukui (R) in the FCX Clarity

The FCX Clarity emits none of the gases responsible for global warming

Japanese car manufacturer Honda has begun the first commercial production of a zero-emission, hydrogen fuel-cell powered vehicle.

The four-seater, called FCX Clarity, runs on hydrogen and electricity, emitting only water vapour.

Honda claims the vehicle offers three times better fuel efficiency than a traditional, gasoline-powered car.

Honda plans to produce 200 of the cars, which are initially only available to lease, over the next three years.

One of the biggest obstacles standing in the way of wider adoption of fuel cell vehicles is the lack of hydrogen fuelling stations.

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John Mendel, executive vice president of American Honda

The first five customers are all based in southern California because of the proximity of hydrogen fuelling stations, Honda said.

US actress Jamie Lee Curtis will be among the first to take delivery of the vehicle, the firm added.

'Monumental step'

The car will initially be available for lease in California starting in July, and then in Japan later this year.

"This is an important day in the history of fuel-cell vehicle technology and a monumental step closer to the day when fuel cell cars will be part of the mainstream," said John Mendel, executive vice president of American Honda.

Honda says it expects to lease a few dozen units in the US and Japan in 2008, and about 200 units within three years.

It said the cost of the car, on a three-year lease, would be \$600 (£300) a month.

Booming demand

Meanwhile, rival Toyota said it was struggling to keep up with booming demand for hybrid vehicles because it is unable to make enough batteries.

Hybrid vehicles, such as Toyota's top-selling Prius, switch between a petrol engine and electric motor.

Toyota Motor Corp's executive vice president, Takeshi Uchiyamada told the Associated Press that new battery production lines can't be added until next year.

"Hybrids are selling so well we are doing all we can to increase production," he said. "We need new lines."