

Nissan may delay electric Leaf production in US

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A Nissan Leaf electric car is displayed at the Shanghai Auto Show in Shanghai in April 2011. Nissan may be forced to delay US production of its electric Leaf and is falling short of this year's goals as a result of the devastating Japanese earthquake, a key executive said Monday.

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"After March 11, all the resources of the company were devoted to helping with the recovery" in Japan, said Hideaki Watanabe, Nissan vice president for zero-emission vehicles.

"It put us in a very difficult situation," Watanabe told a group of reporters over lunch at the Nissan Research and Development Center in suburban Detroit.

"We're trying to shorten the delay but I wouldn't want to make any predictions."

Nissan has delivered 7,550 electric-powered Leafs to customers in Japan, the United States, Hong Kong and Europe so far this year.

Filling order has been slower than expected because Nissan won't be able to meet its production 2011 production target of 50,000 Leafs.

"In 2012, we hope to be in a more normal situation," Watanabe said.

The [electric vehicles](#) proved to be extremely handy during the fuel shortages which followed the earthquake and tsunami, particularly because most owners recharged their vehicles overnight when more electricity was available.

As a result, Nissan is exploring technology that could turn the Leaf and its [lithium-ion battery](#) into an emergency generator, Watanabe said.

The technology would allow the Leaf to discharge electricity as well as drawing it in.

Despite the shortages, Nissan plans to soon begin distributing the Leaf beyond the original seven US states targeted in the initial launch of the vehicle, which included California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Texas

and Tennessee.

Leafs will be in dealers in a half dozen states along the US east coast this fall and in all 50 states by the end of 2012.

About 2,000 Leafs have been delivered to customers in the United States since they went on sale in December and the automaker has the names of 22,000 more potential numbers.

"Even before the earthquake, we decided on a very conservative ramp up. We wanted to double check everything. Quality is our top priority," Watanbe said. Nissan's Tennessee electric battery plant was forecast to come online in late 2012 with the capacity to produce 200,000 batteries annually.

[Nissan](#) had planned to begin building as many as 150,000 Leafs a year in Tennessee by the end of 2012.

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