

High-mileage hybrids have huge payoff

June 20 2013, by Michael E. Kraft

Modern electric hybrid vehicles have been sold in the United States for more than a decade. Honda's two-door Insight hit the U.S. market in 1999, and Toyota marketed its first hybrid four-door sedan, the Prius, in 2000. Many other models soon followed, including hybrid trucks and sport utility vehicles.

All of the hybrids deliver superior mileage, especially in city driving. Hence they appeal to those drivers eager to save money on gasoline, leave a smaller [ecological footprint](#) or demonstrate personal commitment to a greener lifestyle. But are hybrids the best choice for consumers?

These vehicles certainly have some limitations. Many drivers, for example, complain that their performance lags that of conventional vehicles, especially in acceleration. Others suspect that hybrids will not save them much money, even with high gasoline prices, and they are right about that.

Consider two examples. A 2013 [Ford Fusion](#) Hybrid Sedan starts at \$27,200, compared to the regular Fusion at \$21,900, and a 2013 Camry Hybrid Sedan is priced at \$26,140 compared to the gasoline version of the base Camry LE at \$22,235. Fully electric vehicles are more costly, even counting their federal and state tax credits.

Is paying extra for hybrids or [electric cars](#) worth it? At current [gasoline prices](#), most buyers would not come out ahead financially. The payback period is about eight years for the Fusion hybrid and 10 years for the Camry - longer than most people keep their vehicles.

However, such calculations are simplistic and misleading. They fail to put any price on the electric hybrids' significant contribution to improved air quality and their reduction in [greenhouse gas emissions](#) through burning less gasoline. Counting these very real and important costs makes the hybrids a better buy.

The overall [environmental impact](#) of electric hybrids, however, depends on how we produce electricity, and this varies across the nation.

For example, the [Pacific Northwest](#) relies heavily on clean hydroelectric power whereas the Midwest currently relies on dirty coal-fired power plants. Over time, increased use of renewable [energy sources](#) can sharply lower the environmental footprint of hybrids.

For now, each potential buyer ought to consider carefully the place-specific and personal costs and benefits of hybrid or [electric vehicles](#). There are websites devoted to helping consumers make these choices.

There are also larger public policy issues for governments to consider. The nation's continued reliance on fossil fuels to power vehicles makes it hard to improve urban air quality or combat climate change. Thus, over time, the United States and other nations must develop alternatives to gasoline-powered vehicles.

How we should pursue a transition to greener energy sources is subject to continuing political debate. We could consider raising taxes on gasoline and other fossil fuels - a carbon tax - as European nations have done, and we could lower other taxes enough to offset the added burden, so most drivers would face no net tax increase.

Alternatively, we could invest some of the revenue from those taxes in innovative research on electric car batteries and alternative energy sources that could speed our movement away from fossil fuels.

A well-designed and equitable national energy policy could be enormously beneficial over the next decade and even more so in the future. Sharp partisan differences are likely to block congressional action in the near term, but the states and the Obama administration can do much independently to diversify our energy sources and improve energy efficiency.

The president's critics tend to give him little credit for policy achievements over the past few years. Yet one that will have important and enduring effects on energy use is the dramatically higher fuel-efficiency standards he negotiated with the automobile industry.

We can see the impact already in the efficiency of new vehicles, and the changes will be even more impressive over the next decade.

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