

Tesla updating Model S to ease range anxiety, improve safety

March 19 2015, byDee-Ann Durbin

In this April 22, 2014 file photo, a worker cleans a Tesla Model S sedan before a event to deliver the first set of cars to customers in Beijing. Tesla Motors on Thursday, March 19, 2015 said it is updating its Model S electric car to help ease drivers' worries about running out of battery charge. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan, File)

Tesla Motors is updating its Model S electric car to help ease drivers' worries about running out of battery charge—and is hinting that in the future drivers can take their hands off the wheel altogether.

Tesla's latest update—which will be beamed to owners automatically in

about 10 days—will map out the best route to a driver's destination based on the location of charging stations and will guide the car to available spots to charge.

The car will also warn drivers if battery power is low before they drive beyond an area where they can charge. It will take into account elevation, wind speed, air conditioning use and other factors that can deplete the battery.

"You don't need to think ahead and make any calculations," Tesla CEO Elon Musk said during a conference call to announce the update. "The car will always take care of you."

Musk said Tesla is also working on an automatic steering feature on test drives between San Francisco and Seattle. That feature—which could be added with another software update about three months from now—would allow automatic, hands-free driving on a highway with well-marked lanes.

The Model S can travel up to 270 miles on a single battery charge, which is more than double the range of other electric cars on the market, such as the Nissan Leaf. Musk said owners generally find that's enough to get them where they need to go. But range remains a concern for many potential buyers.

"Range is generally one of the issues people have about electric cars, and it is an important thing to address really emphatically," Musk said.

Tesla will update all Model S sedans globally for free. There are about 56,000 Model S sedans on the road. The company's Model X SUV, which will go on sale later this year, will also have the new software.

Musk said the software will give preference to the company's

Supercharger stations—which can almost fully charge a Model S in 30 minutes—but it will also point out other charging points along a route.

Currently, 90 percent of the U.S. population is within 175 miles of a Supercharger. Europe, Canada and parts of China will soon have similar coverage, Musk said.

The update will also add several safety features, including automatic emergency braking, blind spot detection and a side collision warning system. Many of those features are already standard in other luxury cars.

Musk caused a frenzy last Sunday when he tweeted that Tesla was "about to end range anxiety" with a software update. But he might have raised investors' expectations a little too much.

Tesla's shares fell \$2.80, or 1.4 percent, to \$197.91 in afternoon trading after the announcement.

Karl Brauer, a senior analyst with Kelley Blue Book, says the update won't fully eliminate the anxiety over range.

"One could argue such aggressive warnings will only remind drivers how critical it is to get to a charging station before draining the battery pack," he said.

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Citation: Tesla updating Model S to ease range anxiety, improve safety (2015, March 19)
retrieved 2 October 2023 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-03-tesla-ease-range-anxiety-safety.html>

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