

# Toyota to roll out new Prius hybrid as gas prices tumble

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The rollout of Toyota's new Prius comes at an inauspicious time for gas-sipping vehicles.

The Japanese automaker plans to roll out a sleeker version of the car that runs on gas and electricity at a glitzy event Tuesday night in Las Vegas. But gas prices nationwide were at \$2.39 per gallon Thursday, the lowest level in since 2004, and analysts expect more declines now that summer driving season has ended. South Carolina prices are under \$2 per gallon according to AAA, and four other states at \$2.10 or lower.

Spy photos of the 2016 Prius show that it's sleeker and sportier than the

current version. It almost certainly will get better mileage than the 2015 version, which gets 50 miles per gallon in combined city-highway driving. The sportier look could also come with a better ride and crisper handling.

U.S. Prius sales peaked at nearly 237,000 in 2012 with the introduction of wagon and compact models. Gasoline averaged \$3.63 per gallon that year, the most expensive year on record. But since then, Prius sales have fallen to just over 207,000 last year. Through August sales are down 17 percent from a year earlier.

Still, Toyota remains confident that gas prices will rise again and Prius sales will recover.

Sales of hybrid and electric cars generally fall when gasoline prices are low, but the drop during the past two years has been amplified by a global shift to small and large SUVs.

Gas-powered SUVs have become more efficient, with many smaller ones getting more than 30 miles per gallon on the highway. Buyers like the high seating position and gear-hauling capability of the SUVs, which range in size from the small Honda HR-V to larger vehicles like the Chevrolet Suburban.

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