

Ford triples autonomous fleet, poses drone challenge

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Ford is to unveil Tuesday a smorgasbord of technology initiatives ranging from tripling its fleet of autonomous Fusion sedans to funding new mobility startups and also challenging software wizards to program drones and F-150 pickup trucks to navigate disaster relief sites.

Ford CEO Mark Fields, product development chief Raj Nair, and vice president for research and advanced engineering Ken Washington were to present the wide-ranging projects at CES, a huge consumer-electronics show held annually in Las Vegas.

Fields is expected to be asked about a partnership with Google, the subject of widespread media reports last month.

Expected announcements include plans for Ford to triple to 30 the number of fully autonomous Ford Fusion hybrid cars developed at its innovation center in Palo Alto, Calif.

"Using the most advanced technology and expanding our test fleet are clear signs of our commitment to make autonomous vehicles available for millions of people," Nair said in a prepared statement. "With more autonomous vehicles on the road, we are accelerating the development of software algorithms that serve to make our vehicles even smarter."

Ford recently announced that its autonomous cars will be tested in California this year. The company already tests autonomous vehicles at its proving grounds in Dearborn, Mich., and Arizona, as well as on

public roads in Michigan. Ford also has tested fully [autonomous vehicles](#) at Mcity - a 32-acre, full-scale simulated urban environment at the University of Michigan.

Second, Techstars Mobility, a Detroit-based fund to provide modest startup funding, will review applications from new businesses seeking alternatives to single-occupant, single driver automobiles. The goal is to provide up to \$120,000 to a dozen new ventures.

Applicants can apply now at techstars.com/apply. Deadline for submissions is March 22. Participants will kick off the program June 13, culminating with a day of demonstrations on Sept. 8.

Last year Techstars funded 10 startups.

While Executive Chairman Bill Ford was integral to bringing Techstars Mobility to Detroit, funding and mentoring support comes from a variety of other companies, including Magna, Verizon, Dana, Honda, McDonald's and Michelin.

Third, together with drone developer DJI and the United Nations Development Program, Ford is inviting software and other technology providers to participate in a competition to create drone-to-vehicle communications using Ford's Sync AppLink software.

More specifically, the goal would be to create software that would allow an F-150 pickup truck and a drone to inspect disaster emergency zones. The technology could allow United Nations first responders to earthquakes or tsunamis to quickly deploy drones to survey and map hardest-hit areas.

Applicants can visit developer.dji.com/challenge2016. The challenge winner will receive \$100,000.

Finally, Ford is making progress on linking devices such as Amazon Echo and Wink to vehicles so drivers can control lights, thermostats, security systems and other features of their homes from their car.

There are 15 million vehicles on the road with Ford's Sync connection service. Using Sync's AppLink feature, Ford wants to enable drivers to connect smart home technology to open or close a garage door or turn on a porch light within a certain distance from home.

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