

Renault-Nissan to introduce 10 self-driving vehicles by 2020

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Carlos Ghosn, chairman and CEO of Nissan, speaks next to a prototype of the autonomous driving Nissan Leaf at Renault-Nissan Silicon Valley in Sunnyvale, Calif., Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016. The Renault-Nissan Alliance is entering the race to build autonomous cars with a plan to introduce 10 models capable of temporarily relieving humans of their driving duties on highways and city streets. (AP Photo/Terry Chea)

The Renault-Nissan Alliance is entering the race to build autonomous cars with a plan to introduce 10 different models capable of temporarily relieving humans of their driving duties on highways and city streets.

The road map laid out Thursday calls for Renault-Nissan to gradually phase in the self-driving vehicles in the U.S., Europe, Japan and China as its engineers fine-tune the automated technology and its management wrangles with regulators over safety concerns.

If things pan out the way Renault-Nissan envisions, its first batch of self-driving cars debuting later this year will be able to steer while traveling down a single lane on the highway. By 2018, the cars will be able automatically navigate across several

highway lanes and then handle traversing city streets on their own by 2020.

Renault-Nissan's agenda doesn't represent a huge breakthrough.

Some cars, such as Tesla Motors' latest luxury models, already are capable of shifting into self-driving mode on highways, while other vehicles have been able to automatically park themselves for several years.

Renault-Nissan, a partnership between car makers in France and Japan, still isn't ready to identify which models will be infused with the self-driving technology or specify how much the autonomous vehicles will cost.



A prototype of the autonomous driving Nissan Leaf is shown at Renault-Nissan Silicon Valley in Sunnyvale, Calif., Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016. The Renault-Nissan Alliance is entering the race to build autonomous cars with a plan to introduce 10 models capable of temporarily relieving humans of their driving duties on highways and city streets. (AP Photo/Terry Chea)

The alliance still has a lot of work to do to perfect its robotic technology, a point illustrated during a Thursday test drive in a self-driving Nissan Leaf with an Associated Press reporter. The human driver had to grab the steering wheel or step on the brakes on at least three occasions during a 25-minute excursion. During the journey, the vehicle strayed from a lane as the road curved, became confused by a flashing sign in a construction zone and didn't decelerate quickly enough as a traffic signal turned red.

Thursday's announcement at Renault-Nissan's Silicon Valley research center thrusts the alliance into a motorcade of major automakers and technology companies working on self-driving cars. Their goal is to change the way people get around and reduce the number of traffic accidents caused by distracted, drunk or hapless humans behind the wheel.

The competition includes Toyota, Ford Motor, General Motors, Google Inc., ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft and possibly even Apple Inc. The intensifying focus on [self-driving technology](#) reflects a belief that people would rather be texting, checking Facebook, reading, or watching videos instead of having to spend so much of their time tediously steering and braking on increasingly congested roads.

Just how long it will take before cars can be trusted to drive completely on their own is a matter of debate.

Google, which has logged more than 1 million miles in [self-driving cars](#) since 2009, is hoping to have vehicles that don't require any human intervention on the road by 2020 in licensing deals with established automakers. Renault-Nissan and most other major automakers believe vehicles will only be able to take over the driving for short periods under certain traffic conditions, requiring a human to still be paying enough attention to take over the wheel when the robotic technology is faltering and unable to respond properly.

Researchers have already determined that the transition from when a car shifts from robotic driving to human control creates a dangerous situation.

That's because people may not be ready to take over the driving responsibilities if they have become too absorbed doing something else while the vehicle was in autonomous mode.

Renault-Nissan believes that hazard will lessen as motorists become more accustomed to what autonomous driving can and can't do, one reason the alliance is introducing its [robotic technology](#) in incremental steps, said CEO Carlos Ghosn.

"It's going to happen in waves," Ghosn said. "We want to make sure our technology is accepted, understood and used."

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