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Detroit Auto Show News of Note

(AP) DETROIT

Toyota Motor Corp. became the latest automaker to enter the "flex-fuel" market, detailing plans Sunday to offer a Tundra pickup that can run on ethanol blends such as E85.

Toyota, which has aggressively pursued hybrid models such as the popular Prius sedan, said it would offer a flexible fuel Tundra with a 5.7-liter V-8 engine in 2008.

"There's encouragement from the industry, there's encouragement from the government, and we want to be a part of that," Jim Press, Toyota North America's president, said at the North American International Auto Show.

General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co. have increased their flex-fuel offerings as farmers boost ethanol production, and the Bush administration has talked about the corn-based fuel as one way to reduce the nation's dependence upon oil from the Middle East.

Toyota made the announcement as it unfurled the Tundra CrewMax full-size pickup truck, which will arrive in showrooms in March. The CrewMax joins the Tundra regular cab and Tundra double cab models hitting lots in February.

DETROIT (AP) - Ford Motor Co.'s Volvo Cars unit offered a glimpse of its future crossover vehicle with its XC60 Concept, a rendering of the new XC60 planned for showrooms in early 2009.

The crossover features a dark-tinted glass roof and a new tailgate design that allows the lower part to move out and up, allowing a practical opening for getting small items.

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Seats have "pony tail" slots that provide more visibility in the interior, and the concept has a "city safe" system, which applies the brakes when the vehicle is about to crash into the back of another car. Fredrik Arp, Volvo Cars' chief executive officer and president, said the safety system would be offered in Volvo vehicles in the next two years.

DETROIT (AP) - Those funky "Ask Dr. Z" Chrysler ads featuring mustachioed DaimlerChrysler AG Chief Executive Dieter Zetsche will not be returning to the airwaves anytime soon, Zetsche says.

The humorous ads, which among other things featured Zetsche dismantling the suspension of a man's Chrysler sedan in his driveway to show off the car's German engineering, were pulled from the airwaves in August. The radio and television campaign began the previous month amid much fanfare.

After the ads were pulled, a company spokeswoman said the hiatus was temporary while it focused on advertising the company's incentives and new models, and that the ads would definitely return.

But in an interview Sunday at the North American International Auto Show, Zetsche said the campaign was never meant to last a long time.

"It was always meant to be there for two months. We didn't do a very good job of communicating that," he said.

Zetsche said the campaign was successful in touting Chrysler's ties to the quality of its Germany-based parent, which also makes Mercedes-Benz, but it ran simultaneously with a sales campaign that didn't work well.

The company may bring the ads back later, but it won't be in conjunction with a sales campaign, he said.

DETROIT (AP) - DaimlerChrysler AG's Mercedes-Benz division says its Bluetec diesel technology will prove that large, powerful vehicles can offer economical fuel consumption and low emissions.

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The Vision GL420 Bluetec concept was introduced Sunday by DaimlerChrysler CEO Dieter Zetsche at the North American International Auto Show. The vehicle has an assertive look complemented by flared fenders, 21-inch wheels and running boards. The V-8 diesel engine offers 24 miles per gallon.

Mercedes-Benz also is expanding its all-wheel-drive lineup; the company now offers 48 models worldwide with permanent all-wheel drive. The new flagship S-Class features superb traction, comfort and good fuel economy, said Zetsche, who referenced the Dernburg car of 1907 to reinforce the company's tradition of offering all-wheel-drive cars.

"Dancing with the Stars" winners Emmitt Smith and Cheryl Burke helped Zetsche introduce the Mercedes-Benz Ocean Drive four-door convertible concept. The luxury car invokes the classic roadster days of driving with the top down along the shoreline.

The Ocean Drive, based on the Mercedes-Benz S600 12-cylinder platform, has a dominant radiator grille, two-tone paint, downward-sloping lines and a V-shaped front end. The interior features leather and maple trim panels. Located between the seats is a champagne compartment for one bottle and two goblets.

DETROIT (AP) - Chinese-built luxury vehicles that get 100 miles to the gallon with a plug-in hybrid engine could make their way into the U.S. market in 2009 under a new plan from American entrepreneur Malcolm Bricklin.

Bricklin, who brought the Yugo and Subaru to this country, had plans to begin exporting vehicles from China to the U.S. as early as this year in a joint venture with Chery Automobile Co. But the deal fell apart.

Last month, DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group and Chery announced they had agreed on a plan for the Chinese manufacturer to build small cars to be sold worldwide.

In an interview Sunday at the North American International Auto Show, Bricklin said his Visionary Vehicles is now pursuing other Chinese manufacturers and has met with about 15 of them to discuss partnership prospects.

He said Visionary Vehicles will design the luxury cars, which would be built at a factory modeled after Toyota Motor Corp.'s plants.

Bricklin said the Chinese-made vehicles could cost 30 percent less than competing models. And he said that like Toyota's successful gas-electric hybrid Prius, the plug-in technology could encourage other automakers to follow suit.

"They need somebody to push it and they need to see how big the market is," Bricklin said.

DETROIT (AP) - Nissan North America Inc. used the North American International Auto Show on Sunday to roll out its first small crossover sport utility vehicle, the 2008 Rogue, which will go on sale next fall and be targeted to Gen Xers.

The automaker also introduced a concept multipurpose vehicle, the Nissan Bevel, aimed at men ages 45 to 60.

The Rogue will sell for about \$20,000 and come standard with a 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine, power-assisted steering, antilock brakes, a fold-flat front passenger seat and a 60-40 split fold-down rear bench.

Front seat-mounted side-impact supplemental air bags and roof-mounted supplemental air bags with rollover detection are also standard.

Brad Bradshaw, senior vice president for sales and marketing at Nissan North America, said the primary user of the Bevel will be active, middle-aged men who enjoy hobbies and recreational activities.

Among its unusual features are a 110-volt power outlet that provides electricity generated by integrated solar panels and a rear hatch that folds down to create a workbench-like area.

The driver's area has a ribbon-shaped instrument panel that moves four inches backward or forward when the driver's door is opened or closed.

The panel features a series of screens that display images from the sideview

mirror cameras. It also has an entertainment control center that allows a driver to access music, phone settings, weather and traffic reports, and Internet and e-mail accounts.

The instrument panel also will provide access to a home network, to allow monitoring of a security system, appliances, heating and air conditioning, room lighting and garage door status.

DETROIT (AP) - Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates made an appearance via satellite Sunday to help Ford Motor Co. tout the companies' new in-dash system that links cars with cell phones and personal music players.

Gates addressed a crowd at the North American International Auto Show from Las Vegas, where he was for the International Consumer Electronics Show. He discussed the importance of a system like "Sync" in increasing connectivity.

"We need to bring the car into that equation, but in a simple, safe way," Gates said.

Gates was introduced by Ford's Alan Mulally, who took over as president and chief executive of the nation's No. 2 automaker last year. The Detroit auto show was a new experience for Mulally, who previously spent 37 years at aircraft maker Boeing Co.

"Our showroom is getting stronger, thanks to the clarity, the teamwork and the accountability that we now have inside the company," Mulally said.

At the event, Ford also unveiled updated versions of the aging Focus small car and the slow-selling Five Hundred full-size sedan. The vehicles are key to Ford's product-led, North American turnaround effort.

The new Focus is among the models to get the "Sync" system, and he said the option should help draw buyers.

"I think the buzz around being connected in your automobile and being one with the world is going to be a real customer-satisfying advantage for Ford," Mulally said.

Ford also showed a trio of concepts, including a four-door sedan called the Ford Interceptor based on the iconic Mustang sports car, the futuristic Ford Airstream crossover developed with the maker of Airstream travel trailers, and the Lincoln MKR, a four-door coupe that highlights the design elements of the Lincoln brand.

DETROIT (AP) - Bob Lutz couldn't help himself.

When the General Motors Corp. executive introduced the automaker's sleek new electric-powered concept car, the Chevrolet Volt, at the North American International Auto Show on Sunday, he made a humorous, not-so-veiled reference to "Who Killed the Electric Car?"

The 2006 feature-length documentary film about electric-powered automobiles accused GM of conspiring with the oil industry and the U.S. government to cancel its 1990s EV1 electric car.

"Well, here it is - the Chevrolet Volt," said Lutz, GM's vice chairman for global product development. "An electrically driven car by General Motors. I am shocked, truly shocked."

The Volt is a battery-powered four-passenger vehicle that will use GM's next-generation electric propulsion system, called E-flex.

It can be fully charged by plugging it into a 110-volt outlet for about six hours. When the lithium-ion battery is fully charged, it has a range of 40 miles.

The E-flex system's engine can run on gasoline or alternative fuels such as E85, a fuel blend of 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline, or biodiesel. Down the road, it will be possible for it to use fuel cells.

Unlike hybrid vehicles that are driven by both electricity and fuel, the Volt's engine serves only to refresh the car's battery, which is the sole source of locomotion.

The turbocharged engine can get about 50 miles per gallon when producing electricity to run the car.

The company had no date for the vehicle's release, but officials said they are quickly advancing the required battery technology.

DETROIT (AP) - People who followed European racing rallies in the 1960s may recall seeing large, colorful decals on the roofs of participating Mini Coopers.

A roof decal has been available as a factory-installed option since the Mini was reintroduced to the United States in 2002. Third-party companies also install aftermarket decals for roofs or even entire cars.

Among the popular offerings by Mini are a decal with a black-and-white checkerboard design and others with flags of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

With the 2007 redesign of the Mini by BMW AG have come a few more decal options that may cause some double-takes from people passing in taller vehicles. One decal resembles a heliport, while another is a black-and-white version of a Union Jack.

BMW of North America says not only are the new decals sporty, they are opaque and reduce the amount of sunlight that comes into Minis equipped with sunroofs.

DETROIT (AP) - Chef Bobby Flay referenced a tough past year for DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group during an unveiling of Chrysler's new minivans at the North American International Auto Show.

Tom LaSorda, Chrysler's president and chief executive officer, donned a white apron in front of a long kitchen table as part of a promotion of the company's "bread and butter" product, the minivan.

Flay, joining LaSorda on set, told the company leader during the cooking segment, "I can see from your skill set that you're spending a lot of time in the hot kitchen," drawing knowing laughter from reporters.

"The kitchen's been pretty hot lately, I've got to tell you that much," LaSorda

quipped. "Thank you for bringing it up - I've got enough press talking about it already."

DaimlerChrysler is expected to release its 2006 earnings in February, and is expected to announce a restructuring plan that includes job cuts and plant closures. The company lost \$1.5 billion in the third quarter.

Associated Press writers David Runk, Ken Thomas, James Prichard and Ron Vample contributed to this report.

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