

Honda Insight first hybrid to top Japan auto sales



Honda Insight tops monthly auto sales in Japan -- the first time for a hybrid

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TOKYO (AP) -- Honda's Insight, billed as the cheapest gas-electric hybrid on the market, ranked as the top-selling vehicle in Japan for April -- the first time a hybrid has clinched that spot.

Honda Motor Co. has pitched the Insight as an affordable hybrid though such vehicles have a bigger price tag than gasoline engine cars because they're packed with expensive green technology.

The Insight starts at 1.89 million yen (\$19,000) in Japan, where it went on sale in February, and \$19,800 in the U.S., where it is starting to arrive in showrooms.

Honda sold 10,481 Insight cars in April in Japan, according to data released Monday by the Japan Automobile Dealers Association.

That marked the first time a hybrid model was Japan's monthly best-seller, excluding minicars limited to an engine size of up to 660 cubic centimeters, Honda said.

"The all-new Insight has been very well received by a wide range of customers due to its excellent environmental performance, easy-to-use packaging, light and comfortable driving and affordable pricing," the Tokyo-based maker of the Accord sedan and Odyssey minivan said.

But Honda will face tough competition from a revamped version of the world's top-selling hybrid, the Prius, from Japanese rival Toyota Motor Corp.

The revamped Prius is set to be introduced next week and Toyota executives have made clear they are aware of the challenge from the Insight.

Toyota is expected to be aggressive with its pricing, although the Prius is a bigger car than the Insight and would be expected to carry a higher price tag.

Japan has been no exception in seeing its domestic auto market languish because of the global slowdown and credit crunch.

But interest in ecological cars is growing because of government incentives for green technology as part of efforts to stimulate spending amid a recession.

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