

Doubts Cast on Toyota Environmental Claims

By David Piestrzynski

What's friendlier to the environment, a Toyota Prius or a Hummer H3?

Most would say the Prius, which gets about 50 miles per gallon and produces fewer emissions due to its combined gas-electric motor.

The H3 gets about 15 miles per gallon and spews out greenhouse gases pretty much the whole time it's running.

But a pair of recent studies show the much-hyped hybrid, over its lifetime, is worse for the planet than large trucks.

In its latest "Dust to Dust" report, Oregon-based CNW Marketing Research took into account the overall cost and energy expenditure required for planning, building, driving and disposing of each vehicle.

The study, which included all vehicles sold in 2006, found that the Toyota Prius has an overall cost of \$3.249 per mile.

The Hummer H3 cost \$1.949 per mile.

The report's findings were based on several factors, including the breakdown of various metals, plastics and fibers; the cost of material production; labor costs; and the cost of fuel to consumers. CNW's research has drawn heavy criticism since it came out late in 2006, just as Toyota Motor Corp. was about to surpass General Motors Corp. in worldwide sales. One environmentalist even called it "preposterous."

"I have been getting a lot of e-mails from some angry Prius drivers," said Art Spinella, CNW's president. "A lot of them are accusing me of being in GM's pocket."

Toyota executives were among those critical of the findings. One of their major complaints is CNW bases its conclusions on the Prius having a 100,000-mile lifespan.

"If you do nothing else but fix the bogus assumption that the Prius will only last 100,000 miles and the Hummer will last 300,000 miles, and you assume both vehicles will last about 150,000 miles, the math changes," said a spokesman from Toyota's Regulatory Affairs division.

"Under that scenario, the Prius costs \$2.17 per mile vs. the Hummer's \$3.90."

One reason for the Prius' shortened lifespan, Spinella said, is an assumption that changes in hybrid technology will make the existing vehicles obsolete.

Another reason CNW assigned such a short lifespan to the Prius is many manufacturers are now using similar technology, and increased competition could lower demand for older Prius models.

"We've already seen the early stages of this happening with decreasing used values for all of the original batch of hybrids," Spinella said.

One of the biggest costs in CNW's calculations is disposal of the Prius' nickel-metal hydride battery.

John DiPietro, an editor for Edmunds.com, said that's not a concern, because Toyota has a battery recycling program in place.

In his research article titled "Cars From Womb to Tomb: What's Really Green" DiPietro argues the Prius is definitely less green than is claimed.

He blasts the Prius' production by saying the nickel in the battery pack is sourced from a mining plant in Ontario, Canada, which is showing the effects of exposure to the chemical.

"Poisonous sulfur dioxide fumes spewing out of the factory have killed nearly all the surrounding vegetation, giving the once-lush landscape a barren, rocky and otherworldly appearance," DiPietro said in his report.

He said the mine resembles the moon's surface so much that NASA astronauts have used it to test equipment.

By comparison, DiPietro praises Ford Motor Co.'s production of the F-150. He said the company's River Rouge, Mich., assembly plant takes numerous steps to offset its environmental impact, such as having a roof covered in plants that filter rainfall and convert carbon dioxide into oxygen. Spinella called hybrid vehicles a fad, rather than a genuine trend toward public concern for the environment.

"It's a feel-good purchase," Spinella said.

Many consumers buy the vehicles so they can drive the car pool lane or because they like the status that comes with driving the cars, he said.

But DiPietro disagrees. He said just because the average consumer lacks all the facts about the production and disposal of hybrid vehicles, it doesn't mean they don't care.

"People tend to think only of what they see on the show room floor," DiPietro said. "They rarely think of what's going into that car."

Dealerships on both ends of the country are finding it difficult to keep Prius' on their lots. The sales staff at Lithia Toyota in Medford, Ore., said the vehicles are selling "as fast as we can get them."

Toyota of Waterford in Waterford, Mich., is also moving the hybrids with ease.

At both dealerships, salespeople said customers have been sold on the Prius' fuel economy and its environmental benefits.

Overall market demand for hybrids appears to be less robust.

Honda Motor Co. recently announced it will discontinue production of its hybrid Accord.