

Fuel-Cell Vehicles Get A Boost From U.S. Deal

By Ken Thomas

WASHINGTON - General Motors Corp. and DaimlerChrysler AG have signed agreements with the U.S. Department of Energy to develop hydrogen-fuel-cell vehicles over the next five years, the automakers said yesterday.

General Motors, the world's largest automaker, plans to build a fleet of 40 hydrogen-fuel vehicles. Under the program, GM will spend \$44 million to distribute the vehicles in Washington, New York, California and Michigan. The Energy Department also will provide \$44 million in the deal, which is set to expire in September 2009.

DaimlerChrysler, which has the largest fleet of fuel-cell vehicles of any automaker, will invest more than \$70 million in its partnership with the Energy Department, the German-American company said.

"If our research program is successful, it is not unreasonable to think that we could be approaching commercialization and mass marketing of these kinds of vehicles in maybe 15 years," Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman said at the National Hydrogen Association's annual conference in Washington, which coincided with the automakers' announcements.

Bodman said "learning demonstration teams" involving ChevronTexaco, Hyundai Motor Co., Shell, BP, Ford Motor Co., Ballard Power Systems, GM and DaimlerChrysler will evaluate the fuel cells under hot and cold conditions, and consider production options and hydrogen infrastructure.

Under the agreement, DaimlerChrysler will place fuel-cell vehicles with consumers who will provide feedback on the vehicles' performance. The company said it was testing 100 fuel-cell vehicles in various locations around the world.

DaimlerChrysler is developing a range of fuel-cell vehicles, including the Mercedes F-Cell, a four-door passenger car; the Dodge Fuel Cell Sprinter van; and a fleet of fuel-cell-powered Mercedes Citaro buses.

Fuel cells run on the energy produced when hydrogen and oxygen are mixed, rather than using gasoline. The only byproduct of a fuel cell is water. The technology has been used in experimental vehicles and as a power supply for some buildings.

Detroit-based GM also announced that Shell Hydrogen L.L.C. will set up five hydrogen-refueling stations in Washington, New York, California and along the Eastern Seaboard.

The automaker said the U.S. Army at Fort Belvoir, Va., and Quantum Technologies in Lake Forest, Calif., would provide facilities for GM to store and maintain fuel cells.

President Bush has pushed a \$1.7 billion research program to develop hydrogen as America's next energy source and predicted that Americans will drive cars operated by hydrogen-powered fuel cells in two decades.

Most major automakers are developing fuel cells but say the cost of the vehicles and a lack of fueling stations make them unmarketable at this time.

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