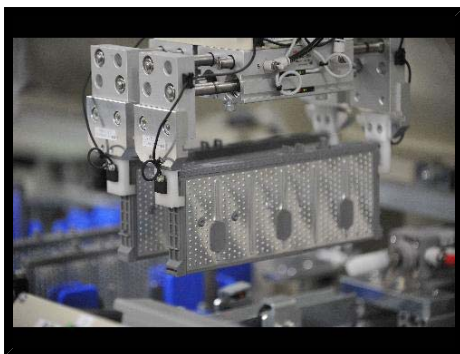


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Toyota Sticks With Nickel After Lithium Prius Test (Update1)

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By Alan Ohnsman



Sept. 14 (Bloomberg) -- **Toyota Motor Corp.**, the biggest seller of hybrid cars, is sticking with nickel as the preferred battery material for most of the vehicles after three years of secretly testing Prius hatchbacks with lithium-ion packs.

Toyota last month ended road tests of 126 Priuses in the U.S., Japan and Europe that began in 2006, company spokeswoman **Jana Hartline** said in an interview. Details of the program, in which the cars' nickel metal hydride batteries were replaced with more expensive lithium models, haven't been released.

Automakers including Toyota are introducing models powered completely or in part by lithium-ion batteries, which can hold twice the energy of nickel packs. While Toyota's lithium batteries performed well and yielded "small" **fuel-economy** gains due to lighter weight, nickel will remain the material of choice for conventional, mass-market hybrids as lithium's benefits didn't justify the higher cost, said **Kazuo Tojima**, the carmaker's senior staff engineer for batteries.

The Toyota City, Japan-based company's tests showed lithium's "durability, stability and safety are assured," Tojima said.

The tests appear to be among the most thorough done by companies planning to introduce the batteries, said **Menahem Anderman**, president of consulting firm Advanced Automotive Batteries in Oregon House, California.

"We now know that a lithium-ion battery can work; that's not really the question," he said. "Cost is critical, and we still don't know enough about long-term durability."

Plug-in Prius

Toyota fell 2.1 percent to 3,760 yen as of the 11 a.m. trading break on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, compared with a 2 percent decline in the Topix index.

Toyota has sold more than 2 million hybrid cars and light trucks worldwide since introducing the Prius in Japan in 1997, almost all using nickel metal. The automaker hasn't announced plans to sell standard hybrids with lithium batteries in the U.S.

This year, Toyota will begin delivering test fleets in the U.S., Japan and Europe consisting of plug-in Priuses that can run 12 miles (19 kilometers) solely on lithium-ion battery power after charging at an electrical outlet. The car is being shown this week at the Frankfurt Motor Show.

The company also plans to sell a small electric car for urban commuters, powered solely by lithium packs, by 2012.

Nissan Motor Co. will begin selling battery-electric Leaf compact cars next year, which the Yokohama-based company says will travel 100 miles on a fully charged lithium pack. **Mitsubishi Motors Corp.** is selling the i-MiEV, a 4.6 million yen (\$51,000) electric minicar that also goes as far as 100 miles using only lithium-ion batteries, in Japan.

U.S. sales operations for Toyota are based in Torrance, California.

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