

Paying the price for efficiency on the road

While hybrid gas-electric cars are eco-friendly, the registration fee is twice that of gasoline-powered vehicles

By Marcus Hathcock for the Emerald

On Earth Day, the only way to cruise is in an energy-efficient, eco-friendly-car. Like something out of a space-age movie, car makers are producing half gasoline-powered/half electric vehicles called hybrids.

Two hybrid vehicles have already appeared on the mass market: the Toyota Prius and the Honda Civic Hybrid. These cars contain both a gasoline-powered engine and an electric battery that the engine charges. According to Honda and Toyota, the motor operates the car at low speeds and during city driving, while the engine is used for driving speeds a generator cannot handle.

The Prius and the Civic both average 48 miles per gallon, according to Honda. Toyota claims that on the highway, the Prius' efficiency improves to 52 mpg.

"I think it's new territory for people," Romania Toyota salesman Bob DeBell said. "Everyone is always a bit wary of new technology, but these hybrids are becoming more and more popular."

While these vehicles have the advantage of being ecologically sound and economically smart, the Oregon Legislature recently enacted a bill doubling the registration fee for such hybrids. House Bill 2133 affected many different types of vehicles, and changed hybrid owners' two-year registration fees from \$30 to \$60.

"On the surface, this (fee) sounds like a disincentive (for people to buy hybrids)," Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles spokesman David House said. "It's simply a method to fund the highway system."

According to House, most of the money the Oregon Department of Transportation receives for highway maintenance comes from the 24 cents per gallon gasoline tax. He said that since hybrid vehicles do not consume as much gasoline as traditional vehicles, the Oregon Legislature had to make up for the potential financial loss.

House added that while the double fee for hybrid vehicles may seem unfair and could be a discouragement to would-be buyers, Oregon's vehicle registration fees are the "second lowest" in the nation.

"In other states, the registration fee is based on the value of the car," he said. "A two-year registration could be \$400 to \$600 for a new car." With that in mind, House said Oregon's registration fees aren't that bad.

If the \$60 fee still seems too steep, House said the government provides hybrid buyers a state income tax credit worth up to \$1,500.

"The state provides an incentive for people who purchase these vehicles," House said.

University Senior Research Associate of Physics Frank Vignola said that while the tax break is a good incentive, the registration fee is "foolish" and unnecessary.

"I've heard people grumbling about this," Vignola said. He said that it's not the fee itself that irritates people; it's that the government should simply take \$30 off the \$1,500 tax credit, instead of giving money out and then taking some of it back.

"I don't think they realized what they were doing when (the Legislature) proposed this bill," Vignola said. "It's a mistake that can be fixed, but needs to be fixed."

DeBell said that the higher registration fees have little to no effect on hybrid buyers.

"People don't usually worry about the registration fee," DeBell said. "That's just something people expect to pay. Some people are a little miffed that they're buying an ecologically sound car and are being penalized for it, but that doesn't stop them from buying it."

Marcus Hathcock is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.



Photo illustration by Adam Jones Emerald



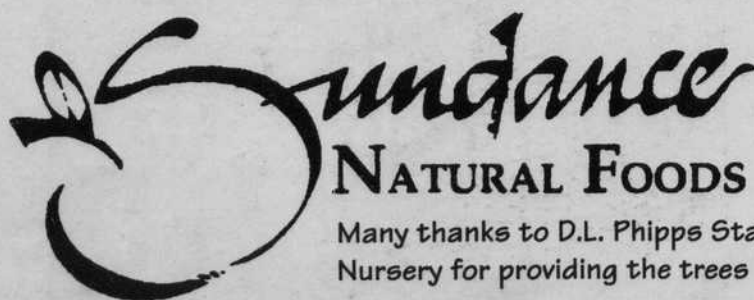
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