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Carmakers bring innovation, research to S.C. university

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GREENVILLE -- After spending months drumming support for hydrogen cars, the faint, high-pitched whirring in the background must have been music to his ears.

"It's really cool," U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., said Monday while sitting behind the wheel of a German-made Zafria minivan.

The whirring was a compressor pushing air into the car's fuel cell. There, it would mix with hydrogen to create the electricity needed to power the car.

But a bigger reaction is taking place across South Carolina.

Toyota Motor Corp. announced in recent weeks a \$1 million research contract with Savannah River National Labs to develop a new hydrogen fuel storage system. BMW, General Motors and Daimler-Chrysler in September announced a joint effort to develop gasoline-electric hybrids. GM, too, has a contract with the Savannah River Technical Center in Aiken to test a hydrogen storage tank. And a second contract is in the works between those two to develop hydrogen storage materials, the company announced Monday.

All this culminates with three private firms that will announce today their intentions to start up at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

"Seeing is believing. There it is. It's here," Inglis said.

GM's HydroGen3 minivan stopped by Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research, or ICAR, off Highway 276 on Monday for a brief dog-and-pony show. It will be in Columbia today for the kickoff of the Engenuity '05 conference.

"This is actually obsolete technology. It's over two years old," said Eric Roskey, a test engineer with a company GM contracts with.

"A lot of people are saying, 'Wow, this is the newest technology. This is great.' But it's really not. Our next generation is coming out in the next couple of years."

Inglis called GM's presence here "recognition that South Carolina has some value to offer in the transition to hydrogen."

He often highlights USC's fuel cell research, the burgeoning ICAR program and hydrogen storage technology in Aiken as the Palmetto State's ticket to the new economy. New York, California and Ohio are ahead of South Carolina in embracing that economy, he said, but storage technology is where this state will shine.

"If we can reinvent the car in America, and play a part in South Carolina ... We can create a huge number of jobs, and take our economy to the next level," Inglis said.

The congressman calls bio-diesel, ethanol and hybrid vehicles great "interim" advances, but is convinced hydrogen is where the future is. He's predicted before that hydrogen cars will be the norm in the next 10 to 20 years.

And while companies are still competing in the marketplace, cross-development is appearing more and more.

"Somebody's going to invent the 8-track, somebody's going to invent the cassette, somebody's going to invent the CD and somebody's going to invent the MP3," Inglis said. "It's a race to see whose is going to work. My guess is they'll all win. People who make 8-tracks made money."

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