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Hydrogen on way to Greer
Inglis says BMW to release bi-fuel car sooner than thought

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BMW is accelerating the rollout of its gasoline-hydrogen bi-fuel car, according to U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis.

"I found out today that it's going to be offered in 12 months," not in 2008 as previously planned, said Inglis, R-Greenville. He said the automaker revealed its intention at the National Hydrogen Association Conference on Tuesday in Long Beach, Calif.

BMW has not publicly announced a timetable for bringing a bi-fuel hydrogen vehicle to market, said Martha McKinley, spokeswoman for BMW of North America.

The company has said that a hydrogen-fueled car -- using an internal combustion engine -- would be available during the life cycle of the current generation of its 7 Series. The 7 sedan received a facelift last year and has several more years of life, she said.

Advertisement "It's very exciting," said Inglis, who has become a congressional leader in pushing for hydrogen research and is promoting South Carolina to play a role in the hydrogen economy he expects in the foreseeable future.

"BMW is out there in front of it. I think the announcement shows that hydrogen is not that far away," he said. "BMW is an engineering company and a car company and plans a hydrogen car soon. It shows this is a doable objective."

Mazda also expects to release a liquid hydrogen-fueled car later this month, Inglis said.

While some believe dual-fuel cars are an interim solution, "I think it's very smart to start" with a car that uses a common fuel as well as an alternative fuel that presently is difficult to obtain, he said.

BMW's research focuses on liquid hydrogen and the internal combustion engine so the feeling of surging power is maintained, the automaker has said.

For a company that considers its vehicles "the ultimate driving machine," the use of a liquid fuel and an internal combustion engine would keep the driving experience the same.

Most people think of hydrogen as a gas, but BMW uses liquid hydrogen -- cooled to minus 433 degrees Fahrenheit -- because it takes up less space.

BMW has sent a fleet of hydrogen-fueled BMWs on a world tour to demonstrate the use of the fuel. A specially built 37-gallon tank gives its prototype cars the capability of driving about 240 miles before refueling.

McKinley said BMW is conducting its research on a bi-fuel vehicle, one using either hydrogen or gasoline.

"There are so few filling stations for hydrogen" that any vehicle initially has to be able to use gasoline, she said.

Inglis said that BMW's announcement "shows it's not the engineering" that is the problem. It's the fuel itself.

"We will need to have fueling stations" before hydrogen-fueled vehicles become more common, he said. Inglis said some gasoline marketers have told him they are willing to add hydrogen-fueling stations to their gasoline stations.

Stewart Spinks, chairman of Greenville-based Spinx Oil Co., said that as soon as there is demand for hydrogen fuel, he is ready to put in fueling stations although the cost of such infrastructure is considerably more than for a liquid product.

"You have to put in a system for a liquefied program under high pressure," he said, which means a different system from a liquid product such as gasoline, diesel or bio-diesel.

However, he's staying involved in the hydrogen-fuel conversation and also is talking with BMW about the potential demand and need.

"I would consider putting in a system if BMW told me they are going to roll out 500 cars," he said, adding he would make no profit in such a situation because of the current lack of demand.

"There is infrastructure money available. There is no demand," Spinks said.

That could change, he said.

"The will of the consumer, a large part of the market, is get off hydrocarbons any way we can," he said.

That is pushing the move toward all alternative fuels.

"I'm taking baby steps" toward alternative fuels, including E-85 and bio-diesel, and he's discussing whether to offer ultra-low sulfur diesel.

"I think hydrogen is coming," Inglis said.

"What is the holdup? Do we not have the technology to convert to hydrogen or do we not have the demand?" he asked. "Demand depends on the cost of gasoline."

Currently, unleaded, self-serve gasoline prices nationwide average \$2.37 a gallon while South Carolina's average price is about \$2.24 a gallon. Unleaded fuel prices spiked 20 cents on Tuesday, Spinks said. AAA surveys show that the price that spurs drivers to change their habits is in the \$3 to \$3.50 a gallon price range.

"The reality we've got to come to grips with is the rising demand from China and India," Inglis said. "The price of gasoline is not going down. It's going up."

That's a trend that will continue, given growth rates of 7 percent annually in China and 8 percent annually in India, he said.

"All kinds of alternatives are going to become acceptable to the marketplace," he said.

Inglis, who touts hydrogen at every opportunity, has said that hydrogen research at the Savannah River Site, the University of South Carolina, Clemson University and BMW can help make South Carolina a major player in the hydrogen economy.
