

Daimler has unveiled further elements of future powertrain strategy

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Fuel-cell GLC expected next year

Mercedes-Benz will launch a pre-production prototype of its new full range electric vehicle (EV) at this October's Paris Motor Show according to Daimler's board member for research and development (R&D) Thomas Weber. He was speaking at an event for journalists at the company's base in Stuttgart, with Reuters reporting his comments. Commenting on the progress that Daimler is making on its new full-range EV Weber said, "The structure is ready, the teams are working and the initial results from road tests are coming in quick succession." Weber did not give a precise launch date for the production variant of the model other than saying it would be this decade. However, it would appear logical to try and get the model to market before or around the time of the 2018 launch date that Audi is targeting for the e-tron Quattro which will be a direct rival for the Mercedes. Weber also confirmed that the company will also launch the fourth-generation variant of the Smart EV which has long been a fixture in the Smart range, with the drivetrain being rolled out on both the ForTwo and ForFour models. Daimler currently offers two fully electric cars and a host of plug-in hybrids which 19 PHEVs scheduled to be launched in the period between 2015 and 2018.



Weber also gave an update on the company's fuel cell technology, with the news that Mercedes-Benz is planning to launch a production fuel cell model for 2017 in the form of a Mercedes GLC hydrogen fuel cell model, which will be a technology first for a production model as it will have a rechargeable battery pack, making it the world's first plug-in fuel cell hybrid. The model has a compact fuel cell stack that was co-developed with Ford and is located in the engine compartment of the conventional version of the car, with drive being sent to the rear wheels only, unlike the conventional GLC. The model has two hydrogen tanks that give it a range of 500 km in conjunction with an 8kWh battery pack which gives the model an extra 50km to hit the 500km target.

Outlook and implications

Daimler is keen to show and promote its credentials as a leader in future powertrain technology and the firm is well advanced with programmes in all the major future powertrain fields. Until EVs can provide conventional passenger car range at conventional passenger car prices and infrastructure improves, take-up will be limited, but it appears the tipping point is moving ever nearer with the premium OEMs looking to introduce products that will directly rival Tesla's current market dominance of the premium, full-range EV market space. Although the Model S and X are undoubtedly massively impressive technological achievements and the brand has the potential to be an industry disruptor, there is certainly plenty of evidence that Tesla has struggled with certain quality aspects. These are the areas in which companies like Mercedes and Audi are experts, having honed mass car production and purchasing over many decades, something that Tesla as a relatively new manufacturing company is having to learn very quickly. It will be interesting to see how Tesla reacts to direct competition from industry stalwarts like Mercedes-Benz and Audi and what impact the proliferation of new PHEVs coming onto the market will have on the development of EV sales. Mercedes-Benz currently has 13 hybrids, eight of which are plug-ins with two more models due to join the range by next year and is one of the leading OEMs pushing the technology. Daimler is hoping that its portfolio of EV and PHEVs will make up a six-figure tally of its combined sales by 2020, with the company also hoping to benefit from further government initiatives such as the recently announced EV and PHEV incentive program.

CONTACTS

The Americas

+1 877 863 1306

Europe, Middle East & Africa

+44 20 7176 1234

Asia-Pacific

+852 2533 3565

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