Toyota to start plug-in hybrid leasing

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(AP) TOKYO – Toyota said Wednesday it will start leasing plug-in hybrid cars, that are even greener than its hit Prius, by the end of this year in the U.S., Japan and Europe.

Toyota Motor Corp., the world's top automaker, will start leasing 200 plug-ins in Japan, 150 in the U.S. and 150 in Europe, mostly for rental, such as through special government-backed programs, it said in a release.

Toyota will for the first time use lithium-ion batteries in the plug-ins. The batteries are already used in some cars but more common in laptops and other gadgets.

Toyota hybrids now use nickel-metal hydride batteries. Using a lithium-ion battery will produce more energy, allowing the car to run more as an electric vehicle, but there have been some technological hurdles.

A plug-in recharges from a regular household socket. When the battery runs low, it will start running as a regular hybrid so drivers don't have to worry about running out of juice on the road.

Automakers around the world are working on plug-in models. Recharging stations are expected to proliferate in the cities of the future, much like gasoline stands, for recharging.

The booming sales of the revamped Prius, which went on sale last month, have been a rare bright spot for Toyota.

Battered by the global slump and the strong yen, the maker of the Camry sedan and Lexus luxury models recorded its worst loss in its seven-decade history for the fiscal year ended March.

Toyota dealers have received 110,000 orders for the Prius in Japan. Toyota acknowledged this week an order placed this month won't get delivered until November or later.

Toyota leads the world in cumulative hybrid sales because of the popularity of the

Prius, now in its third generation. The first-generation Prius went on sale in 1997.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/07/2015 - 3:49pm*):
http://www.ecnmag.com/blogs/2009/06/toyota-start-plug-hybrid-leasing