Nissan upgrades Leaf, lowers price

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TOKYO (AP) -- The upgraded Nissan Motor Co. Leaf electric car can travel further without recharging, comes in a cheaper model and tells drivers how much

battery life is left.

The changes in the revamped model, shown Tuesday at a Tokyo hotel, were based on feedback from owners whose chief worry was running out of electric juice while driving, Nissan officials said.

Electric cars emit no pollution, but they need to be recharged. Owners have charging equipment installed at home. But the scarcity of recharging stations on the roads has limited electric vehicles use to short commutes and kept zero-emission cars confined to a market niche.

The new model can travel 228 kilometers (142 miles) on a single charge, up from 200 kilometers (124 miles) as long as you don't use air conditioning, because of improvements such as streamlining the battery system and the vehicle's lighter weight, according to Nissan.

It sells for less than 2.5 million yen ($31,000) in Japan when stripped of fancy options and adding government green subsidies — more affordable than the cheapest previous model at just below 3 million yen ($37,000).

Nissan did not detail overseas sales plans but said similar upgrades were in the works.

The Leaf is the world's most popular electric vehicle, comprising more than half of all electric car sales. Leaf global sales since late 2010 total 43,000 vehicles, about half of them in Japan.

More than 17,000 Leaf cars have been sold in the U.S. and monthly sales are recently at about 1,500 vehicles, according to Nissan.

Senior Vice President Masaaki Nishizawa told reporters the Leaf does away with the hassles of going to gas stations and allows drivers a cleaner conscience.

"People who try out the Leaf are moved," he said. "But they are worried about cruise range."

When the Leaf first went on sale, recharging facilities were at 200 Nissan dealerships in Japan. That will grow to 700 Nissan dealers later this year, or 1,200

locations, when including other spots such as convenience stores.

Among other changes to the Leaf:

— Roomier luggage space after the recharging mechanism became smaller and was moved to the front.

— A dashboard display that tells how much battery charge is left.

— A navigation system that calculates the best energy-saving route to your destination.

— A smaller lighter recharging nozzle.

— Reduction of rare-earth use by 40 percent for the electric motor.

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