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## Chevy Volt, Toyota Prius Are Among AAA's Top 2011 Picks for 'Green' Vehicles



By Cheryl Kaftan

[TMcnet Contributor](#)

In honor of the upcoming Earth Day 2011 on April 22, the auto-buying experts at AAA, the largest U.S. motor club, have announced their top picks for "green" vehicles, from fully electric to hydrogen-fueled technology.

Among the vehicles on the list is the plug-in hybrid electric Chevrolet Volt—which also has been recognized as the [2011 North American Car of the Year](#) by automotive journalists, [Motor Trend's Car of the Year](#), one of [Car and Driver's 2011 10 Best Cars](#), and the [Green Car Journal's Green Car of the Year](#).



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The gasoline-electric hybrid Toyota Prius is noted as the car "to beat," with a justly earned reputation for reliability and 50-miles-per-gallon fuel economy. This week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) awarded Toyota Motor Engineering & Manufacturing North America, Inc. (TEMA), with its [2011 ENERGY STAR Sustained Excellence Award](#) in recognition of its continued leadership in protecting the environment through energy efficiency and management. More than 60 percent of all U.S. hybrid buyers continue to choose the Prius, which has now [sold one million vehicles](#) in the United States and more than 2 million globally. Since the Prius was introduced to the U.S. market in 2000, more than 97 percent of all Toyota Prii (yes, that's the plural) sold are still on the road.

Referring to this year's list, John Nielsen, AAA National Director of Auto Repair, Buying, and Consumer Information, said "There has been an influx of 'green' technologies, which is great for consumers looking to make a more environmentally conscious choice for their next vehicle purchase. Increasing the efficiency of the cars we drive means that less fuel is burned for every mile driven. That's great news for the environment and our pocketbooks."

Some of the technologies AAA highlights as making these advances possible include:

### Electric Power

Today's fully electric vehicles do not use gasoline at all. The [Nissan Leaf](#) is the standout in this category. Depending on traffic, speed and temperature, owners can expect to travel 50 to 80 miles on a single charge. That's well within the range of most daily commutes. Enhancing the Leaf's appeal, charging stations are increasingly available in the cities where this car is sold.

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With the average cost for a kilowatt hour of electrical energy at approximately 12 cents, a full charge in a Leaf would cost around \$3.17. That works out to between 4 cents and 6.5 cents per mile for fuel. A comparable compact car would burn nearly 11 cents worth of gasoline for every mile traveled. Making the Leaf even more appealing and green, there will be no need for oil changes, ignition system maintenance, fuel system service or exhaust pipe and muffler replacements.

The [Mini E Electric](#) and the Daimler-produced [Smart Fortwo Electric Drive](#) are also available (for lease only) in very limited numbers. Ford is planning on producing an electric version of its [Focus](#) in the near future.

#### **Plug-In Hybrid Electric Vehicles**

Similar economy can be realized in the plug-in hybrid powertrains. These use a rechargeable battery pack that enables the car to travel up to 35 miles before the onboard gasoline engine starts. Unlike fully electric vehicles, a plug-in hybrid is limited only by the range of its gas tank.

The [Chevrolet Volt](#), which should be available nationwide by year-end, uses this technology. Owners can plug in the car overnight; then, drive 25 to 40 miles before the gasoline engine starts to recharge the batteries. For most drivers, this range covers the daily commute, suggesting that the gasoline engine will rarely be needed. However, when a longer trip is planned, even one that goes from coast to coast, the Chevrolet Volt will be able to use its gasoline engine much as a normal car would.

While the Chevrolet Volt is the only commercially available plug-in hybrid electric vehicle (PHEV) now offered from a major automaker, watch for the [Toyota Prius PHEV](#) to arrive later this year.

#### **Gasoline-Electric Hybrids**

These vehicles use a gasoline engine and an electric motor. A full or parallel hybrid can run on either the gasoline or electric motor, or use both for peak performance. A mild hybrid uses the electric motor to deliver thrust to the gasoline engine, which must always be running when the car is moving. The [Ford Fusion](#) and [Lincoln MKZ](#) hybrids can hit speeds of up to 45 miles per hour and travel for more than two miles using only battery power.

Hybrids never need to be plugged into a wall outlet or external charging station to keep the batteries at full power. The gasoline engine that powers the car also handles the task of recharging the batteries.

For fuel economy and minimal environmental impact from its operation, the [Toyota Prius](#) is the hybrid to beat. Many owners report 50-plus miles to the gallon in daily driving. The [Ford Fusion](#) also delivers impressive fuel economy, and its transitions from electric to gasoline power are exceptionally smooth. The new [Hyundai Sonata](#) hybrid is also impressive.

#### **Compressed Natural Gas**

Vehicles running on compressed natural gas (CNG) marry efficiency with markedly reduced tailpipe emissions. While many gasoline-powered vehicles have been converted to run on compressed natural gas, which is abundant and produced in the United States, the [Honda Civic GX](#) is the only sedan that comes from the factory with this ability. CNG vehicles use a standard piston engine.

#### **Let Us Not Forget Gasoline and Diesel Vehicles**

The regular internal combustion engine is getting greener, too, with the new, attractive compact [Chevy Cruze Eco](#) averaging 36 miles per gallon in AAA testing.

Diesels are not often considered "green," but the latest generation diesels produce fewer tailpipe emissions and significantly reduce carbon dioxide output. Today's diesels are so clean they meet environmental standards in all states. Among diesel powered cars, the [Audi A3](#) is a standout.

#### **A Hydrogen Future?**

Hydrogen has been proclaimed as the fuel of the future. Currently Honda ([News - Alert](#)) has a fleet of [FCX Clarity](#) fuel cell sedans on lease to drivers in California. There are hurdles to be overcome, including the cost of fuel cells and the development of a hydrogen infrastructure. There also are interesting alternative uses for these vehicles. One such application: A fuel cell powered car could easily provide electric power to an average home in the event of a power failure. What role hydrogen will play in the future is still to be decided. The performance of cars, such

as the **FCX Clarity** ([News - Alert](#)), however, is not in doubt. It is a thoroughly credible vehicle.

AAA's top picks for new vehicle technology are selected by AAA Auto Buying experts who review hundreds of vehicles each year. The list takes into consideration not only the first appearance of a new technology in vehicles, but also its availability to U.S. motorists in popular mainstream vehicles.

*Cheryl Kaften is an accomplished communicator who has written for consumer and corporate audiences. She has worked extensively for MasterCard ([News - Alert](#)) Worldwide, Philip Morris USA (Altria), and KPMG, and has consulted for Estee Lauder and the Philadelphia Inquirer Newspapers. To read more of her articles, please visit her [columnist page](#).*

Edited by [Janice McDuffee](#)



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