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By Gary Stoller
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Hertz, Avis add hybrids to fleets

Renters can drive Toyota's Prius

In an apparent race to be seen as the greenest company in the industry, car rental giants Hertz and Avis are adding thousands of new, fuel-efficient hybrid cars to their fleets this month.

Hertz announces today that it is putting 1,000 Toyota Prius gas-electric hybrids into its U.S. fleet this month. They will be available at 50 big airport locations and in Manhattan.

The company expects to have nearly 2,000 hybrids in its 410,000-vehicle U.S. and European fleet by the end of this year and 4,300 by the middle of next year, Executive Vice President Brian Kennedy says.

Asked about its plans, Avis said Wednesday that it will introduce 1,000 Priuses into its fleet by the end of this month. The Avis hybrids will primarily be available in California, with some in the Washington, D.C., area, Seattle and Portland, Ore., spokesman John Barrows says. Hertz and Avis say they'll guarantee hybrid reservations.

The moves follow a public relations initiative last week by Enterprise Rent-A-Car, highlighting what the company called its "unparalleled fleet of fuel-efficient vehicles," which includes 3,000 gas-electric hybrids in the USA.

Enterprise says it has more fuel-efficient cars than any other rental company. It says 28% of its 199,000 vehicles worldwide average at least 32 miles per gallon of gas.

The companies' announcements reflect a broader array of recent environmental initiatives by the travel industry, which is under increasing public scrutiny for its contributions to air pollution.

Hybrid vehicles average about 55 miles per gallon of gas. Auto rental experts say it remains unclear whether the hybrids will be popular with customers.

Hertz, the largest rental company at airports, says a hybrid car costs renters \$5 to \$10 more per day. If a renter drives 500 miles, a hybrid car can save \$20 to \$45 in gas expenses vs. a standard vehicle, Kennedy says.

"The world is becoming more environmentally sensitive, and to Hertz's credit, it is putting its toe in the water," auto rental consultant Neil Abrams says. "But as the public cries for more environmental awareness, will customers be willing to pay more for renting hybrid vehicles?"

Hertz's move to increase the number of hybrids from the less than 50 already in its fleet is one of several environmental initiatives by the company.

Hertz said today that it is donating \$1 million to the National Park Foundation and, in recognition of New York City's environmental initiatives, making a \$250,000 contribution to The Mayor's Fund for the Advancement of New York City.