

Jeep reveals hybrid Wrangler, 1st US battery-powered vehicle

3 September 2020, by Tom Krisher



This photo provided by Fiat Chrysler shows the 2021 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon 4xe. Fiat Chrysler on Thursday, Sept. 3, 2020, unveiled the first of what it says will be many Jeeps powered by batteries. The Jeep Wrangler 4xe is the brand's first vehicle that can travel on electricity in the U.S. The gas-electric hybrid SUV can go 25 miles on battery power before a 2-liter, four-cylinder turbocharged engine takes over. (Fiat Chrysler via AP)

Fiat Chrysler's Jeep brand is starting to offer gas-electric hybrid and eventually full electric powertrains across its lineup.

The company rolled out the first of them for the U.S. on Thursday, a plug-in rechargeable Wrangler to go on sale in America, Europe and China early next year.

The Wrangler 4xe can go 25 miles (40 kilometers) on electricity before a 2-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine takes over. Drivers can choose to have an engine-powered generator recharge the batteries (at a higher fuel consumption rate), although it would take about 2.5 hours at 45 to 55 mph (72.4 to 88.5 kilometers per hour) to fully replenish them.

A big driver of the new offerings is FCA's obligation to meet fuel economy and pollution regulations in Europe, China, and the U.S. or face stiff fines or steep costs to buy electric vehicle credits from companies like Tesla.

Jeep Brand President Christian Meunier conceded the move to electric Jeeps is being done partly to meet regulatory requirements, but also because there's a market for them. The Wrangler, he said, can run both gas and electric power simultaneously, making it more capable off the road.

Fiat Chrysler says driving on electricity in the woods is a big attraction for many buyers who want to travel quietly and without pollution. Meunier said the company is working on a plan to put solar-powered charging stations near trails.

"There are a lot of Jeep owners, people who go off-roading, who also want to preserve the environment where they go off-roading," Guidehouse analyst Sam Abuelsamid said.

Fiat Chrysler and Jeep, by far its most popular brand, have been late to the electric vehicle party. While crosstown rivals Ford and General Motors are rolling out new fully electric vehicles, Fiat Chrysler's only offering with battery power in the U.S. currently is a hybrid Chrysler Pacifica minivan.

The Wrangler 4xe, due in showrooms early next year, will have a 375 horsepower available if electric and gas motors are used at the same time, and the company says it will get the equivalent of 50 miles per gallon of gasoline (21.3 kilometers per liter). It can also run in a hybrid mode, switching between gasoline and electricity to get the most efficiency.

Fiat Chrysler says Jeep will have electric options on each of its vehicles in the next few years. Already it's introducing plug-in Compass and Renegade

small SUVs in Europe.

It's uncertain when the smaller plug-in Jeeps will enter the U.S. market, Meunier said. "The market is not completely mature for the smaller segment, but we're still looking at that," he said.

The market in the U.S. also is unclear for a plug-in Wrangler, or any electric vehicles for that matter, Abuelsamid said. Last year in the U.S., only 310,000 plug-in hybrid and fully electric vehicles were sold, less than 2% of the market.

Meunier said FCA is working on a fully electric Wrangler, but he wouldn't say when it would arrive. "I think the market is right if you bring the right technology at the right price," he said.

The price for the plug-in wasn't revealed, but it will surely be a premium over the gas-powered version. A four-door model for 2021 starts at \$31,795 excluding shipping.

At the other end of the spectrum, Fiat Chrysler also announced that the Wagoneer and Grand Wagoneer full-size SUVs will return next year. The company showed off a Grand Wagoneer concept vehicle with a fully electric powertrain.

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