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EPA Says Toyota Prius Hybrid No Longer 'Most Fuel-Efficient'



By **John Voelcker**
Senior Editor
July 27th, 2011

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2011 Toyota Prius

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Ask Americans about fuel-efficient cars, and many will name the iconic [Toyota Prius](#) hybrid, with gas mileage rated by the EPA at a combined 50 miles per gallon.

So you'd expect the EPA to rank the Prius as the best midsize car on its list of [Most and Least Fuel Efficient Cars](#), right?

It's not there.

Instead, it's been displaced by the battery-electric [2011 Nissan Leaf](#), which doesn't use fuel at all. The EPA rates the Leaf electric car at a combined 99 MPGe, or equivalent miles per gallon.

A footnote on the EPA site explains, "MPGe is miles per gallon of gasoline-equivalent and represents the miles per amount of energy of a non-gasoline fuel that is equivalent to the amount of energy in a gallon of gasoline. For an EV or PHEV, 33.7 kilowatt-hours of electricity represents the same amount of energy as one gallon of gasoline."



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2011 Nissan Leaf, Nashville, October 2010

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completely ignore the Prius, unless they go into the larger list and sort by gas mileage.

Our reader (and Prius owner) John C. Briggs wrote to the EPA questioning the omission of the Prius from the list. On Monday, an unnamed EPA employee responded to Briggs, signing the note as "FuelEconomy.gov".

Here's what s/he wrote:

Our Best-Worst list shows the best automatic transmission vehicle and best manual transmission vehicle in each category. Because the Toyota Prius is classified as a midsize car and only comes with an automatic transmission, it is competing against the [Nissan Leaf](#) which has a rating of 106 city/92 Hwy (MPGe). The [Hyundai Elantra](#) is the most efficient manual transmission vehicle in that size class.

When you exclude EVs (there is a link at the top of the table that allows you to exclude EVs), the Prius replaces the Nissan Leaf as the most efficient Midsize car with an automatic transmission.



2011 Chevrolet Volt drive test, March 2011

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This is admittedly confusing, and we will soon be launching a redesigned version of this list. It is my understanding that we will be dropping the transmission distinction by next year and we will be simply listing the best in each category regardless of the transmission type.

When we initially came up with this list, it was typical for the vehicle with the top fuel economy to have a manual transmission. It was pointed out that most people don't want a manual transmission and that it should show the top automatic as well. Since then automatic transmissions have improved and evolved with continuously variable

But does this make sense? The majority of U.S. car buyers today likely aren't quite ready to buy a plug-in car, if indeed they could get one (orders for both the Leaf and the 2011 Chevy Volt are backlogged due to limited production).

But based on the EPA's best and worst list--which shows an automatic and a manual winner for each size category--potential buyers might

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transmissions, automated dry double clutch transmissions, optional manual shift paddles on automatic transmissions, etc.

Now our current method for ranking vehicles is increasingly out of phase with the market. Hopefully we will be able to improve on this list soon.

Briggs comments, "Personally I think this shows the folly of MPGe as a metric and don't think the Nissan Leaf should be placed in the same category, but it is debatable."

Since we do a bit of software development here at High Gear Media, we have one very quick and simple suggestion for the EPA: Switch the list's default view to the one that excludes electric cars.

But then, make the link to include electric cars a whole lot more visible.

There! We've done our bit to improve government for the day. If only Congress and the President could manage to do the same thing....

+++++

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[2011 Chevrolet Volt](#)

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Chris O

Posted: 7/27/2011 12:24pm PDT

De MPGe concept seems misleading because there is no gasoline equivalence between EV's and gasoline powered vehicles, unless the electricity for EV's is derived from gasoline which is rarely the case of course. It's a pity that ICE's turn most of the BTU's from gasoline in heat making them functionally heaters with traction as a by product but the fact is they use a resource that is useless for EV's unless converted into electricity first, but in that case there is no longer 33.7 KWH of energy in a gallon but probably less than half of that for even the most efficient conversion process. A Prius would in fact have better MPG than a Leaf....

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Ramon Leigh

Posted: 7/27/2011 1:08pm PDT

Only our brainless Feds can come up with a measure so meaningless and pointless as "MPGe." First off, a gallon of gasoline as burned in an ICE does NOT produce 33 Kwhr's worth of propulsive energy. For proof, realize 1) most of the energy in that gasoline is released in the form of heat, not kinetic energy, 2) look at the Chevy Volt. We all know that it gets roughly 5 miles per kilowatthour of juice. We also know that when it is using its gasoline range extender, the mileage is 35 MPG, which means, obviously, that a gallon of gasoline is producing (very roughly) 7 kilowatthours, not the 33 implicitly claimed by the EPA. The mileage for an EV is, strangley enough, expressed properly in terms of electricity, as in miles per kilowatthour

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which they define as the gasoline-equivalent. This is simply wrong to do in this case, as this does not convey the proper information that a consumer is looking for.

If the consumer looks at fuel economy as a surrogate for operation cost, then the cost per unit energy must be factored

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Ev Now-now

Posted: 7/27/2011 7:22pm PDT

Well, Prius isn't the most efficient car anymore in mid-size. Is that so difficult to digest? Looks like there is a big anti-ev bias in this post, sad for a "green car" website.

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John Voelcker

Posted: 7/28/2011 4:14am PDT

No anti-electric car bias here! But it's necessary to add reality and context: The total number of plug-ins that will be sold in the U.S. during 2011 will be 25,000 at best, which is roughly 1/20th of the number of Priuses Toyota will build. That ratio will improve over time, but for the moment, you can buy a Toyota Prius at will, whereas there are months-long waiting lists for any plug-in vehicle. Hence, the Prius is a better bet for buyers who need to replace their car now or want to reduce their carbon output today.

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Douglas Quine

Posted: 7/28/2011 5:02am PDT

This article and discussion demonstrate the futility of making these vehicle category distinctions. If a driver seeks an efficient vehicle, they should have access to an efficiency list that ranks ALL vehicles. The current system requires you to know the answer and access the "correct" category list. Drivers seeking efficient cars shouldn't have to be engineers who already know the answer to their question.

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