

Will new incentives spark interest in electric cars?

By John Cox

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Paul Gipe's plug-in electric vehicle gets about 84 miles on a full charge, so getting around town is never a problem. It's when the Bakersfield resident and his wife wanted to visit a niece in Ridgecrest earlier this month that things got tricky.

Faced with a lack of "fast charge" stations along the way, Gipe paid \$1,000 for a special adapter he connected to an electrical outlet at an RV park near Lake Isabella. The device allowed the couple to get back on the road after two hours — much quicker than the recharge would have taken without it.

As much as Gipe prides himself on "pioneering" such routes and sharing his experiences with other electric vehicle owners, he wants to see more charging stations in and around Kern County.

"They're in Los Angeles, they're in San Diego, they're in the Bay area," said Gipe, a prominent wind energy blogger. But "they've neglected the Central Valley."

State and regional officials hope to fill that gap by offering a series of financial incentives to promote development of electric vehicle "infrastructure" in the valley and elsewhere. Just this month they rolled out two new programs geared specifically toward construction of new electric vehicle charging stations.

But there is little consensus on how far these stations will go in helping California meet Gov. Jerry Brown's clean-air goal of putting 1.5 million zero-emission vehicles on the state's roadways by 2025.

In what many describe as a "chicken-and-egg" dilemma, people familiar with the challenges of electric vehicles say the bigger hurdle is to improve the cars' range per charge and lower their sales price. Only then, they contend, will there be enough electric car owners to justify building a lot more charging stations.

Among the biggest skeptics are local car dealers. They say shoppers are turned off by electric vehicles that go no more than 100 miles on a charge, especially at a time of relatively low gasoline prices and increasing fuel efficiency in gas-powered vehicles.

"I'm sure it helps to have more charging stations around town. But to increase the electric vehicle sales, I think the manufacturers need to work on getting ... longer distance on a full charge," said Bakersfield car dealer Masoud Bashirtash.

Electric vehicle advocates acknowledge a need for car batteries that can carry passengers farther on a charge. They point to progress in that area and say building more charging stations simply complements technological advancements.

"It's not one or the other. We need both," said Christine Kehoe, executive director of the California Plug-In Electric Vehicle Collaborative.

What's beyond dispute is how far behind the valley's electric vehicle infrastructure has fallen behind the rest of the state.

While no authoritative count exists, the U.S. Department of Energy estimates the valley has about 18 public charging stations for plug-in electric cars, and 33 serving hybrid gas-electric vehicles. These figures do not include residential charging stations or private, brand-specific stations located at car dealerships.

A year ago, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District found only 1.5 percent of California's plug-in electric vehicle registrations were in the valley. That compared with 45 percent in the Los Angeles area, 35 percent in the Bay Area and 8.5 percent in and around San Diego.

"We're way behind the rest of the state when it comes to electric vehicles," said the district's executive director, Seyed Sadredin.

California as a whole leads the nation in purchases of new plug-in electric vehicles, with 42 percent of the 329,145 sold in the U.S. between January 2011 and May 2015, according to data from Kehoe's collaborative.

Still, non-plug-in hybrids continue to outsell what are known as “pure” electric plug-in vehicles, the California New Car Dealers Association reported last month. It said manufacturers of plug-in electrics quadrupled their U.S. market share to 1.6 percent between 2011 and 2014, while at the same time, non-plug-in hybrids’ share rose from 4.8 percent to 6.3 percent.

There are indications the attraction of hybrids and plug-in electric vehicles may be slipping in Kern. Surveys done by Scarborough Research for The Californian concluded the share of adults in the county who were planning on buying or leasing either kind of vehicle fell more than half in two years, from 4.6 percent in March 2013 to 1.9 percent in March 2015.

Sadredin blames consumer misconceptions about electric cars. He said car buyers focus too much on the vehicles’ driving range and not enough on how much money they save.

“For day to day, work and personal life needs, an electric vehicle can more than meet your needs,” he said.

He laid out a scenario in which a valley resident could lease a \$200-per-month electric plug-in “almost at no cost” because of a \$2,500 state rebate combined with another from the district for \$3,000.

The latest incentives push has less to do with vehicle purchases and more to do with charger stations.

The air district program announced June 2 offers businesses and public agencies up to \$6,000 per public charger through the agency’s Charge Up! grants program. Applicants are limited to \$50,000 each, and the program itself is capped at \$2 million, after which time Sadredin said there will be a round of grants aimed at establishing charger stations in underserved areas.

A separate program created by the California Energy Commission and administered by the state Treasurer’s office was announced June 9. It offers a 15 percent rebate to developers of public charging stations, as well as loan guarantees to lenders who finance such projects. The program is capped at \$2 million.

Taft car dealer Devinder Singh is still not convinced building more charging stations is the answer. He said efforts would be better spent on not only improving plug-in vehicle technology, but also coming up with a better solution for disposing of spent electric car batteries.

On that point, he makes a bold claim for someone selling cars for a living.

“I think we need to go back to the horse and buggies,” he said.

Air district offers new grant program

Joseph Luiz

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The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is giving organizations an incentive to offer electric vehicle charging stations.

Businesses and public agencies are being given the chance to receive up to \$6,000 per charging station made available for public use through the district’s new Charge Up! Grant program. A total of \$2 million is expected to be given out in this first round of funding.

“We’re pleased to offer what Valley businesses, agencies and the public have asked for: convenient access to charging stations for the growing population of electric vehicles,” said Sheraz Gill, the district’s grants director.

Organizations can get up to \$5,000 for a single-port charger and up to \$6,000 for a two-port charger. The funding limit is \$50,000 per applicant, with the grants awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.

To apply for a Charge Up! Grant, visit www.valleyair.org/ChargeUp. Applications can also be submitted in person or by calling 230-5800.

There is currently no electric vehicle charging station in Kings County.

Fires impact foothills and mountainous areas

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Three wildfires, Sky and Corrine Fires in Madera County and Triangle Fire in Mariposa County, have prompted local air officials to issue a health cautionary statement for smoke impacts in the eastern portions of Merced, Madera and Fresno counties. The caution is in place until the fires are extinguished.

Smoke from fires produces fine-particulate matter, which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks, and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke. Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure. Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on their local conditions.