

Prius loses ground to other cars

Rival technologies take on Toyota

By John Reed in London

Conventional petrol and diesel cars are beginning to outpace Toyota's Prius on environmental friendliness, a new study claims.

The iconic hybrid car is still the cleanest for its size, but is outranked by 11 smaller Peugeot, Citroën, Ford, Smart, and other cars in a new environmental rating system.

The system is devised by researchers at Cardiff University and Clifford Thames, an automotive consultancy.

The researchers also studied cars due to launch shortly.

They claim that petrol and diesel cars with new emissions-cutting technology will soon outpace the Prius on a size-for-size basis.

"Conventional technology will overtake the Prius over the next 12 to 18 months, and consumers won't have to pay a premium for it," said David Riemenschneider, Clifford Thames's chief executive.

The research, based on publicly available data, points to the huge improvements manufacturers – under pressure from regulators to reduce emissions – are making on non-hybrid cars with diesel or petrol engines.

Rather than focusing on exhaust emissions only, the ranking also takes into account cars' overall environmental "footprint" including raw materials, production, and end-of-life costs – based on their length, width and weight.

Toyota's Prius is the best-selling hybrid in the world, and still one of the lowest-emission cars on the road.

However, the car is larger and somewhat heavier than many rival low-emission vehicles, due in part to its large battery and transmission, making for added environmental costs, the researchers claim.

Toyota has played up its "green" credentials, based largely on its hybrids, but like other manufacturers it is also investing in other emissions-cutting new technology applied to conventional small cars.