

UP TO SPEED

LOS ANGELES AUTO SHOW



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L.A. Auto Show: A VW diesel is Green Car of Year

And who's the greenest of them all? Volkswagen's new Jetta TDI.

The sporty diesel-powered sedan was named 2009 Green Car of the Year at the Los Angeles Auto Show today, beating out two hybrids, another diesel and a car that looks like a golf cart.

"It breaks new ground in the field of clean diesel," said Ron Cogan, editor and publisher of Green Car Journal, which sponsors the award. He cited the Jetta's "satisfying driving experience," low emissions and 41 mpg highway fuel economy.



The other finalists in the competition were BMW's 335d, also a diesel; the Ford Fusion gasoline-electric hybrid; the Saturn Vue hybrid; and the ultra-compact Smart ForTwo.

The award was bestowed by a nine-member panel of judges, including Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council; "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno; car guy Carroll Shelby; and Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club.

Pope conceded that a small group of Sierra Club members might question the group's participation in a contest that recognizes any automobile as "green" when there are such eco-friendly alternatives as bike riding or public transportation.

But the prevailing view is that environmentalists can help influence the sale, and more important the development, of cars that pollute less.

"The awards make a difference to people who design and engineer cars, and we want to get their support," Pope said in an interview earlier this week.

Cogan sounded a similar note at today's ceremony at the Los Angeles Convention Center: "Increasingly, concept cars ... are green in nature," he said. "Some may find their way to showrooms in just a few short years. Green cars represent the future of the industry."

This year's award is likely to raise fewer eyebrows than last year's winner: the eight-passenger V-8 Chevy Tahoe hybrid. Pope, no fan of sport utility vehicles, defended the choice.

"The reality is most people drive SUVs in urban use," the environmentalist said. "And the Tahoe got the same urban mileage as the Toyota Camry."

-- John Corrigan

Photo: Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times