



Vehicles

## Most Fuel-Efficient Cars For The Buck

Hannah Elliott, 05.19.09, 6:00 PM ET

President Obama's new efficiency standards will require all passenger-vehicle fleets to average 39 miles per gallon by 2016. The engineering required to achieve that increase in efficiency will likely add about \$1,300 to the price of most vehicles, administration officials say.

But as the price of these greener vehicles rises, you can expect to make up the cost in savings on gas--and you won't even need a hybrid to do it.

### In Depth: Most Fuel-Efficient Cars For The Buck

Indeed, as prices at the pump have dropped so have sales of hybrids--by almost two-thirds. It's not that consumers have lost their sense of green; they're just focusing more on the kind in their wallets. For instance, the inexpensive, fuel-efficient (and conventional) [Hyundai Accent](#) and Hyundai Sonata saw sales increases--of 26.1% and 7.4%, respectively--last month over the same month in 2008. Volvo's two-door C30 saw a respectable 1.5% increase.

With the national price of gas averaging \$2.31 per gallon, it's simply a question of math: Which is more attractive, a \$22,000 Prius or an \$11,070 Accent? Adding in fuel costs for five years, the Accent--despite the difference in fuel efficiency--is by far the better deal.

In fact, no hybrids made our list of the most fuel-efficient cars for the buck.

### Behind the Numbers

To compile our list, we used data from Vincentric, an automotive research company based in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. We then added the price of gas for each vehicle (assuming 15,000 miles per year over a five-year span) to manufacturer-suggested retail prices (MSRP) and took the 2009 models with the lowest sums.

Small, inexpensive cars dominated the field, most of them coming from automakers in Korea and Japan.

At the top is the Accent. It not only has stellar fuel efficiency (27 mpg in the city and 33 mpg on the highway), it is also the least expensive vehicle on the list. With five years' worth of gas added in, the total cost of the Accent is \$16,727--more than \$5,000 less than the sticker price of a Prius.

This is just one more feather in Hyundai's cap this year. Two of its models made our list, and the company's recent win for "car of the year" award for its Genesis sedan at Detroit's North American International Auto Show, as well as the Elantra SE being named the best small sedan of 2009 by *Consumer Reports*, indicate that this is a brand on the rise.

"Hyundai has managed over the past five years to actually get the cars right from a construction perspective, because for their first years the stuff was crap," says Robert Passikoff, president of New York-based market analysis firm Brand Keys. "But now they've got it. I think that they're ones to watch."

### Fuel-Sipping Standouts

Another notable car on our list is the [Chevrolet Aveo](#), the highest-rated entry on our list from an American automaker. The \$11,965 sedan gets 27 mpg in the city and 34 mpg on the highway, and it is cheaper than the third-ranked \$12,205 [Toyota Yaris](#), which gets slightly better gas mileage.

The Aveo is the perfect example of the importance of paying attention to more than just MSRP--or fuel efficiency alone, for that matter. Combining the two factors makes the Aveo a great buy.

The [Suzuki SX4](#), for example, might seem unappealing at first, since it gets only 22 mpg in the city and 29 mpg on the highway--the lowest of any car on the list. But the low MSRP of \$13,299 helps keep the total cost down once fuel is factored in, pushing the vehicle into the eighth spot on our list.

### **Green Turf Wars**

The [Honda Fit](#), the 10th-ranked car on the list, is notable not just for making the cut but for its importance in a larger battle between Honda and Toyota. Honda recently introduced its \$23,650 Civic Hybrid (40 mpg city/45 mpg highway) to battle Toyota's \$22,000 Prius (48 mpg city/45 mpg highway), but consumers still view Toyota as the industry leader when it comes to eco-mindedness, brand experts say.

The Prius is "the epitome of what being green is all about at an affordable price," says Wes Brown, a principal analyst at Los Angeles-based Iceology, a consumer-research firm. Honda's Fit, then, is a different player in a larger game--and one that might make a difference.

The reason is that consumers can't count on hybrids as a long-term green solution. Hybrids depend on oil just like conventional vehicles, points out Mike Granoff, the head of oil independence policy for Better Place, a California group that works to promote oil-free transportation worldwide.

"When the economy does come back and we go back to selling 14 [million], 16 million cars a year in the United States, that means that oil will also come back to \$80, \$100, \$120 a barrel," he says. "The cars that are profitable now are not going to be sold in that environment."

In other words, with gas costing much less than it did a year ago and hybrid sales sluggish, an efficient gasoline engine might be better than wearing the "hybrid" badge of pride.

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