

Ford Relents, Allowing Ranger EV Drivers to Buy Leased Trucks

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Abandoning its attempt to reclaim electric-powered pickup trucks from individuals who had leased them, the Ford Motor Company said last week that it would allow leaseholders of its Ford Ranger EV to purchase their vehicles.

Ford had refused to sell the trucks to leaseholders, saying it wanted to avoid liability for any problems that might arise. The company had also said that not enough Ranger EV's were on the road to justify the maintenance costs.

The decision came after two California lessees staged an unusual protest at a Ford dealership in Sacramento, the state capital. Dave Raboy, a rancher from Catheys Valley, and William Korthof, a solar panel installer from Orange County, parked their battery-powered Rangers in front of a line of Ford's most petroleum-hungry trucks. Setting up a solar charging system, the men vowed not to leave until Ford either publicly repossessed the electric Rangers or offered them the option to buy the trucks.

In the last couple of years, fleet and private lessees of EV Rangers have been asking Ford for permission to purchase their vehicles outright. Ford even offered Mr. Korthof and Mr. Raboy a purchase option at lease end. But when they tried to exercise this option, they were turned down.

Rather than turn the vehicles back in, the men simply continued to pay on their leases. But in early 2004, Ford began threatening repossession and actually did reclaim a Ranger EV leased by Ray Levinson, an environmental programs manager for the United States Postal Service on the West Coast. Mr. Levinson will now be allowed to buy his impounded truck.

"The truck is so quiet that my cows get surprised when I come near the herd," said Mr. Raboy, who organized the protest with the help of the Rainforest Action Network, an environmental advocacy group. "I don't know why Ford wanted to repossess them," he said in a telephone interview.

"The only thing I can think of is that it cost me nothing to maintain -- no service, no oil changes, no spare parts," he said. "Maybe it has something to do with not putting oil into it, but I'm not a conspiracy theorist."

Several manufacturers, including Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, Honda and Toyota built highway-legal electric-powered vehicles in the late 1990's to satisfy California's Zero Emissions Vehicle mandate, which required a small percentage

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Tomas Ovalle for The New York Times Electric message on Dave Raboy's Ford electric truck.

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of cars sold to produce no tailpipe emissions. Automakers bitterly fought the rule and it was relaxed to include hybrids and ultra low emissions vehicles, or ULEV's. While automakers said that that limited range and an unfamiliar technology limited demand for electric vehicles, passionate owners and lessees claimed they were never given a fair chance.

General Motors has since reclaimed and crushed nearly all its EV-1 cars, which remain the most energy-efficient cars ever produced by an American manufacturer. Honda has reclaimed several hundred of its bullet-shaped EV-Plus cars and Toyota still has several hundred electric RAV4 S.U.V.'s in the hands of lessees and private owners. Toyota says it will continue to lease the fleet cars so long as they don't require major maintenance and has offered the purchase options to its private lessees. Fleet RAV4 EV's that have been reclaimed have largely been dismantled.

Ford built around 1500 electric Rangers and sold them from 1998 to 2002 to a relatively few private individuals and a number of fleet customers. Today, less than 100 have avoided the crusher. Mr. Levinson leased a fleet of 500 Ranger EV based delivery trucks for the Postal Service, but Ford soon recalled them on the basis that replacement nickel-metal-hydrate batteries would not be available. "But mine's just as peppy and seems to have the same range as it did when I got it," said Mr. Levinson.

After the EV sit-in received national media coverage, Ford announced that it would allow all of the remaining EV Rangers to be purchased. "When we recognized how passionate these people were, we said 'we're happy to work with you to work out terms under which you can purchase these vehicles,'" said Carolyn Brown, a Ford spokeswoman. "It really was a customer satisfaction issue."

"It's really disappointing, that at a time we need to be moving away from oil dependency, that Ford is giving big incentives on gas-guzzling vehicles and refusing to offer electric vehicles," said Mr. Korthof. "I hope this recent decision is a turning point for them."

But Ms. Brown, the Ford spokeswoman, offered little hope for that. "We are not in the battery-electric vehicle business."

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