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New frontier in bioplastics

Fabric and consoles in Mazda bio-car made from corn starch. By Vichaya Pitsuwan

Most people associate corn starch with food, but the Japanese carmaker Mazda is finding a host of other uses from plastic to fabrics in its vehicles as it aims to be more environmentally friendly.

Senior research engineer Takahiro Tochioka shows off the seat fabric developed from corn starch in thenew Mazda5.Sevenof the models arenowon the roads, all rented to Japanese companies and government agencies. SOMCHAI POOMLARD

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Mazda plans to introduce its innovations - bioplastic internal consoles and bio-fabric seats - in its Mazda5 model at EcoInnovasia 2008, to be held from Friday to Sunday at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center in Bangkok.

According to Takahiro Tochioka, the senior research engineer from Mazda Motor Corporation's technical research centre, up to 30% of the interior parts in the Mazda5 made of bio-material components.

"We want to show that Mazda is committed to saving the environment," Mr Tochioka said.

He said bioplastics used for vehicles needed to have higher strength and heat thresholds than ordinary plastics as Mazda intended to correct bioplastic's well-known weak points.

"It needs to be highly elastic to prevent breaks in accidents and it needs to be able to tolerate high heat from sunlight as bioplastic is well known for its

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weak heat-resistance qualities," Mr Tochioka said.

The bio-materials in the Mazda5 have been specially designed to meet these requirements, and the next step is to develop the materials to allow for bioplastic use on the car's exterior.

Apart from using bioplastic and bio-fabric, the Mazda5 is also a hybrid car that allows the use of various types of fuels such as petrol, hydrogen or an electric system to power it.

When the car runs on hydrogen, it produces zero emissions, but even with a petrol refuelling system, it is slightly more fuel efficient than a conventional car. Currently there are seven Mazda5 models in the world, all rented to Japanese government agencies and private companies that want to raise bio-industry awareness and gain an image of being environmentally friendly organisations.

"At present, a petrochemical company called Idemitsu and a gas and energy company called Iwatani, both in Japan, are our two private customers. We charge a rental fee of more than 100,000 baht per month," Mr Tochioka said.

While Mazda didn't disclose how much their hybrid costs to manufacture, Mr Tochioka said the line would be commercialised next year with its target customers Japanese government agencies and private companies that emit a lot of greenhouse gases.

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