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Electric trucks may get reprieve

By Thuy-Doan Le -- Bee Staff Writer

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Ford Motor Co. said it would meet today to discuss how to accommodate a handful of California drivers who are refusing to turn in their leased, electric-powered Ford Ranger trucks, which the carmaker wants to scrap.

One owner in the tug-of-war is David Bernikoff-Raboy, whose lease on his zero-emissions truck ended in April. Hoping to keep the vehicle, he has continued making monthly lease payments.

The software designer/ rancher from Catheys Valley in Mariposa County has been camping out at the Downtown Ford dealership on 16th Street with a handful of supporters protesting the carmaker's decision to discontinue leasing its electric-powered vehicles. His truck, along with a similar one owned by William Korthof of Pomona, are parked at the Sacramento dealership in protest.

Since the protest started Friday, the automaker has changed its stance. Carolyn Brown, a Ford spokeswoman in Dearborn, Mich., said the company would find a way to "make these owners happy." She estimated fewer than 100 of the trucks are still on the road and most of their leases expire soon.

"It's such a small number of owners, and we're going to take a look to accommodate them," she said.

The company launched its leasing program for electric-powered trucks in the late 1990s. Because of low consumer demand, the company decided to end its electric-powered program to concentrate on hybrid vehicles.

As each lease ended, Ford took possession of the trucks and disposed of them, Brown said.

But both Bernikoff-Raboy and Korthof said they are willing to sign a waiver that would free Ford from any liabilities and ongoing maintenance. They simply want to keep their nonpolluting vehicles.

"I just want to see the vehicle still exist," said Bernikoff-Raboy. "Through American technology, we can have a nonpolluting, nonoil vehicle."

Bill Van Amburg, senior vice president of WestStart-Calstart, a nonprofit organization that works with public and private sectors on transportation technologies, said there is a need for all types of cars, including electric, hybrid and natural gas.

While many of the big carmakers have withdrawn from their all-electric vehicle programs, many people who drive these cars don't want to give them up, he said.

Van Amburg said he understood Ford's decision but was still disappointed that the company doesn't "keep a portfolio" of alternative-fuel vehicles available to drivers.

"There are certainly issues with the electric batteries, but there's very little you need to do with them," Van Amburg said. "You don't have the standard under-the-hood problems. ... (They) require very little maintenance."

About the writer:

- The Bee's Thuy-Doan Le can be reached at (916) 321-1040 or tdle@sacbee.com.

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The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000

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