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When plug-in meets peak: Revealing the real impact of electric vehicles

The transition from petrol and diesel cars to plug-in electric vehicles can be achieved without a major impact on power networks, a major energy conference in Melbourne was told today.

EnergyAustralia's Robert Smith, a leading energy economist, said even as electric vehicles become commercially available, consumer uptake will be gradual because of the continuing high cost of batteries to power the cars.

"Improvements are needed in battery technology to tip the economics in favour of electric vehicles," he said at the Energy 21C conference in Melbourne.

"However, it won't happen overnight and energy networks will have ample time to adapt to changing consumer demand for plug-in motoring.

"Initially, it will be a matter of customer choice. Just as some people rush out today to buy a bright red sports car while others are happy in a family sedan, consumer preferences will drive demand for the first electric vehicles.

"In that context, electricity networks will be watching closely as the debate continues about whether the electric vehicle remains the car of the future, or whether it becomes a car with a future."

Mr Smith works on demand management and policy for EnergyAustralia.

"It has been forecast by some that the widespread adoption of electric vehicles could add about seven per cent to Australia's electricity consumption," he said

"But just as people take advantage of off-peak pricing structures for hot water, they can learn to minimise their energy costs and spread the impact of electric vehicles over energy peaks.

"Electric vehicles are cheap run. At existing off-peak electricity rates, plugging-in overnight can cost only a tenth of filling up at the petrol pump.

"But the cost of batteries is the thing to watch. When the batteries become cheaper to buy we can expect to see real customer interest in electric vehicles."

Interview: Robert Smith is available for interview.

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