

Dealers order more than 8,000 diesel-powered Ram 1500s in 3 days

March total equals almost half of normal output

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Chrysler began assembling Ram 1500 EcoDiesels in January at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit.

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DETROIT -- Chrysler Group dealers ordered more than 8,000 diesel-powered Ram 1500 pickups in the first weekend that they could do so -- a figure that represents nearly half of the light-duty pickup's normal monthly production.

Included in the orders placed between Feb. 7 and 10 were more than 400 diesel-powered half-ton pickups that had already been sold to customers.

That's about five times the normal percentage of sold orders for a typical prelaunch vehicle, said Bob Hegbloom, director of the Ram brand.

"This just helps to solidify in our minds that we did the right thing with this truck," Hegbloom told *Automotive News* today.

Chrysler began building its first salable Ram 1500s with a 3.0-liter V-6 EcoDiesel engine late last month at its Warren Assembly plant in suburban Detroit. Those pre-spec vehicles are due to be delivered to dealers in the next three weeks.

The company disclosed plans to sell a diesel-powered light-duty pickup almost a year ago.

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The percentage of initial diesel orders by dealers is about double or triple what brand executives had anticipated, Hegbloom said. While demand is likely to taper off as dealers receive unsold inventory, Hegbloom said that in coming months, presold orders will be given production priority to keep customer wait times down.

"Our anticipation is that there's going to be some ongoing demand for this powertrain," Hegbloom said.

The diesel engine is made by Fiat subsidiary VM Motori S.p.A. in Italy. It produces 240 hp and 420 pounds-feet of torque and is mated in the Ram 1500 to an eight-speed automatic transmission. The diesel engine's exhaust is treated with urea to reduce emissions of oxides of nitrogen, which causes smog. The onboard urea tank must be refilled every 10,000 miles.

The Ram 1500 EcoDiesel is the first light-duty, diesel-powered, full-sized pickup to be offered in North America since General Motors sold them in the mid-1990s.

Ram brand head Reid Bigland estimated that diesel versions will account for as many as 30 percent of Ram 1500 sales.

The Ram 1500 EcoDiesel starts at \$30,465, including shipping. The price is \$2,850 higher than a similarly equipped Ram 1500 with a 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 engine, the company says.

Because dealers have not yet received any Ram 1500 EcoDiesels, it's difficult to tell whether the retailers will tack on an additional premium over the sticker price to take advantage of hot demand.

Hegbloom said that he hoped they wouldn't, because the diesel-powered Ram is "an opportunity to conquest competitive brands, and if dealers don't treat new customers right, they're going to lose them."

Chuck Eddy, chairman of the Chrysler National Dealer Council, said he ordered three times his monthly allocation of diesel-powered Ram 1500s, just to make sure he didn't run out.

"Everybody's gung-ho about it," said Eddy, owner of Bob & Chuck Eddy Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep-Ram near Youngstown, Ohio. "The factory's just not going to have enough to go around, at least for a while."

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