

TESLA HOPES ITS ELECTRIC SEMI WILL BE HEAVY DUTY 'GAME CHANGER'

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The Tesla Semi, the company's electric big-rig truck seen in an undated handout image. | Photo Credit: Reuters

US automaker Tesla on Thursday delivered its first battery-powered heavy duty truck, dubbed "Semi," and built to tackle long hauls with the handling of a sporty sedan.

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"That thing looks like it came from the future," Tesla chief Elon Musk said while handing over the keys to PepsiCo executives at the vehicle maker's Nevada manufacturing plant.

With its sleek design, the Semi has been highly anticipated since Musk unveiled a prototype in 2017, but the launch of full-scale production was delayed well past the initial 2019 expectation.

"The sheer amount of drama between five years ago and now is insane," Musk told a small audience invited to the factory for an event marking the occasion.

"A lot has happened in the world. But, here we are. It's real."

In the meantime, other manufacturers have entered the market, from traditional truck makers such as Daimler, Volvo and China's BYD, to startups like US company Nikola.

The competition has also begun to roll out their deliveries, and have many orders of their own waiting to fill.

However, the truck that "the market has been waiting for... is the one from Tesla," says Dave Mullaney, a transportation specialist with sustainability think tank RMI.

Legacy manufacturers have primarily converted their diesel-designed trucks to electric.

Tesla's Semi, on the other hand, "was designed to be electric from the very first design," says

Mullaney.

If the vehicle lives up to expectations, "it's going to be a huge difference," he adds.

Musk reiterated the claim Thursday that a Semi had driven 500 miles (800 kilometers) with a total weight of nearly 82,000 pounds (more than 37 metric tons).

The range of electric vehicles currently on offer is only between 250 to 300 miles.

"You have all the power you need to get the job done," Musk said of the Tesla Semi.

"This is a game changer."

The use of electric light duty vehicles for short-haul deliveries has been steadily growing, but new regulations are pushing manufacturers and transporters to speed up the transition and build out long-haul capabilities.

The most populous US state, California, has passed a law phasing out combustion engine trucks, which has since been followed by other states.

The European Union is also expected to debate similar standards in the coming months.

And on the PR front, companies are also facing pressure to take more environmentally conscious actions. They "want to be on the right side of history," says Marie Cheron of the Europe-based association Transport & Environment.

Those who do not commit to a decarbonization strategy, some of whom say they are waiting for technologies to improve, "are falling behind," she says.

While making up a scant portion of vehicles on the road, diesel-powered semi trucks account for about a fifth of climate-harming emissions spewed by traffic, according to Musk.

"So from a health standpoint, particularly in cities, this is a huge impact," Musk said of the shift to electric semis.

Mike Roeth, director of the North American Council for Freight Efficiency, says that another motivation to transition is that drivers who have been able to test them, "love the electric trucks a lot."

"They're very quiet, they don't have the smells of the exhaust, and they are comfortable to drive."

For the adoption of electric trucks to accelerate, their range must truly live up to promises and batteries ideally would shrink, several analysts told AFP.

The charging infrastructure must also be built out to handle multiple trucks powering up simultaneously and have storage capacity to work during power outages.

The biggest factor, however, will be the price. The Semi price was not disclosed at the Tesla event.

RMI's Mullaney says that an electric truck currently costs about 70% more to buy than a diesel truck, but in terms of fuel and maintenance, it's cheaper.

With the first delivery accomplished, Wedbush Securities analyst Dan Ives says that Tesla must now "prove they can produce at scale, they need to execute."

In late October, Musk said that Tesla is aiming to build 50,000 Semis by 2024.

Ives says Musk's attention is unfortunately focused on his [newest acquisition, Twitter](#), and "the circus show there takes away a monumental moment in Tesla history."

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