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Nissan to boost production of Altimas

Mississippi shifts workers from SUVs to cars

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Like other automakers, Nissan's truck business is sagging, but car sales are booming. As a result, the automaker said Monday that it will eliminate one truck and SUV manufacturing shift at its Canton, Miss., plant, and add a third shift to produce the hot-selling Altima midsize sedan.

No jobs will be lost, as the company will shift to the Altima line some of the workers from the truck and SUV assembly shift that is ending, Nissan North America Inc. spokeswoman Julie Lawless said from the company's Nashville headquarters. Others will be transferred to the remaining truck and SUV shift, she said.

The second shift of truck production will end July 7, while the additional Altima shift will be up to speed by Sept. 2, she said.

May's record Altima sales, along with record drops in truck and SUV sales, prompted the move, Lawless said.

"We're not running out of Altimas," she said. "We have enough to supply our dealers now. But with last month's sales and the way things are going in the industry, we need to look forward to make sure we will have enough."

Toyota is considering a similar plan for its truck and SUV plant in Lafayette, Ind., the industry weekly *Automotive News* reported Monday, citing unidentified "supplier sources." Production of the full-size Tundra pickup and Sequoia SUV would be trimmed to allow for the addition of the midsize Camry sedan to the plant's product line.

Last month, Toyota said it was shifting the bulk of Tundra production to its San Antonio, Texas, plant, whose only product is the Tundra.

The Camry is one of four Japanese sedans that outsold the Ford F-series pickup in May, the first time since 1991 that the F-series was not the best-selling vehicle in the United States. The other top-selling sedans were the compact Honda Civic in first place, the midsize Honda Accord and the compact Toyota Corolla.

Smyrna to build Maxima

Nissan is not adding to Altima sedan production in its Smyrna plant, because that facility is now "ramping up to build the redesigned 2009 Maxima sedan," Lawless said.

Smyrna also assembles the Altima coupe, which is selling well, too. Canton does not produce either the Altima coupe or the Maxima.

With the third shift, the Canton plant will build about 17,000 of the Altima sedans each month, up from

the present 15,000, she said.

Nissan sold 34,428 of the Altima sedans and coupes in May, up 43.5 percent from May 2007, when 23,980 Altimas were sold. The coupe version, added for 2008, was not offered in May 2007.

Nissan's truck sales, which include the Titan and Frontier pickups; the Nissan Armada, Pathfinder and Xterra SUVs; and the Infiniti QX56 SUV, were down 10.6 percent in May from the same month in 2007. May truck/SUV sales totaled 27,055, while car sales for the month totaled 63,324, up 21 percent.

Overall, Nissan North America's truck sales were off 11 percent this year through May, to 151,095 vehicles, while car sales were up 10.3 percent, to 242,814, in the same period, the automaker said.

Nissan plans Titan's end

Nissan also said this week that it would begin selling a new clean-diesel powered sport utility vehicle in Japan during 2010, but did not say whether that vehicle is being considered for the U.S. market.

The company said earlier that a clean-diesel version of the Maxima sedan, which is built only in Smyrna, would be added to the lineup in 2010.

And in April, Nissan said it planned to end production of its full-size Titan pickup in Canton at the end of 2010, and shift part of the plant to building a new line of commercial trucks and vans for the U.S. market.

Canton is the only facility building the Titan, but Nissan said it had entered into an agreement with Chrysler LLC to have that automaker build a full-size pickup for Nissan beginning in 2011, replacing the Nissan-built Titan.

That truck would be designed on the architecture of the Dodge Ram.

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