

Ford To Unveil the Biggest SUV Yet

■ Critics have dubbed the 19-foot Excursion a "suburban assault vehicle"

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The Associated Press

DETROIT — Ford Motor Co. is rolling out the industry's biggest sport-utility vehicle yet, a nine-seat colossus of the road that the Sierra Club warns will "guzzle enough gas to make Saddam Hussein smile."

The 3.5-ton, six-door Ford Excursion — at 19 feet nearly a foot longer than the current biggest sport utility, the Chevrolet/GMC Suburban — will go on sale in the fall as a 2000 model.

The Excursion is so long and tall that it won't even fit in many garages, said Jim Hall, an analyst with AutoPacific Inc.

It is expected to sell for \$45,000 to \$50,000, with a per-vehicle profit of between \$12,000 and \$20,000. That will make it one of the most profitable vehicles on the road.

Months before its arrival in showroom, environmentalists have aimed a series of stinging attacks at it as part of their campaign against sport utility vehicles. With its beefy V10 engine, the Excursion is expected to get only 12 miles per gallon.

The Sierra Club has dubbed it a "suburban assault vehicle." It ran a contest to give the big truck a name and advertising slogan. The winner: "The Ford Valdez. Have you driven a tanker lately?"

The Excursion poses a dilemma for Ford. New chairman William Clay Ford Jr., who considers himself a "lifelong environmentalist," has promised to make the world's No. 2 automaker the leader in developing clean vehicles.

But Ford's financial success in recent years has resulted largely from meeting Americans' demand for powerful pickups and SUVs, which burn more fuel and tend to pollute more than cars.

Ford has been uncommonly quiet about the Excursion. The vehicle is conspicuously absent from this year's auto show circuit. Ford executives generally have declined to talk about it. Today, Ford plans a low-key unveiling of the Excursion to reporters at its Dearborn headquarters.

"It's basically a garbage truck that dumps into the sky," Dan Becker of the Sierra Club said Wednesday. "For Ford to build a massive, gas-guzzling, polluting vehicle like this shows how high a job Bill Ford has to make Ford into a green company."

Ford wouldn't comment on the criticism. The standard reply from Detroit executives is that they're simply build-

ing the kind of vehicles people want. And one of the biggest growth markets has been for big, expensive SUVs.

Environmentalists argue that Detroit has created the SUV demand by spending billions on advertising over the past decade to promote them as fashionable, rugged, go-anywhere transport — even though most owners use them primarily to commute and go to the store.

"You can't turn on the TV or turn a page in a magazine without seeing an SUV climbing up a mountain so people can play Frisbee on top," Becker said. "They're not advertising their most efficient vehicles, the clean ones."

The Excursion originally was conceived as a heavy-duty hauler largely for commercial use. But the unexpected strong demand for the big Ford Expedition and its luxury sibling, the Lincoln Navigator, prompted executives to design the Excursion as an upmarket alternative to the Suburban.