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Legendary Mazda technology set to return, but not as you know it

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Mazda's rotary engine is set for an eco-friendly revival. The engine best known for powering cult sports cars such as the RX-7 and RX-8 will soon be born again — initially in an SUV.

But instead of powering the car, the new generation rotary designed to meet strict European emissions standards will initially be used as a simple generator to charge the batteries in a plug-in hybrid electric system.

Mazda has confirmed it is working on a range extender version of its MX-30 that was unveiled at this week's Tokyo motor show and is expected to go on sale in Australia in 2021.

The confirmation that work is under way gives more clarity as to the long awaited revival of the rotary engine.

"The technology development is under way [for a range extender hybrid]," said MX-30 program manager Tomiko Takeuchi. The MX-30 is Mazda's first pure electric vehicle but will also spawn hybrid models, including at least one that uses a modern version of the rotary.

The rotary engine's relatively compact size and light weight make it an appealing fit for hybrid systems, helping maximise efficiency. Mazda also plans to sell the rotary as a generator for building sights or campers.

While Mazda has long been working on such a rotary range extender system, this week's announcements at the Tokyo motor show provide a clearer indication of where the technology will resurface.





Left: The legendary Mazda RX-7 was a hit on and off the track in the 19080s.
Right: Mazda's RX-Vision concept teased the return of a rotary-powered sports car back in 2015

And it's only the start of a rotary revival. Mazda is also working on a new rotary sports car to follow in the footsteps of the RX-7 and RX-8. Research and development boss Ichiro Hirose said a modern Mazda RX was "still our dream", albeit one Mazda has been spruiking for more than a decade, even teasing with concept cars such as RX-Vision of 2015.

His comments were backed by design chief Ikuo Maeda, who admitted the "clock is ticking" regarding a modern Mazda rotary sports car. "We never give up on that dream … there are still many fans of sports cars," he said. "We understand that we are racing against time." But it's a race the brand appears confident of winning.

Mazda has patented various engine details around a modern rotary using a turbocharger.

Only recently an RX-8 was spotted lapping the Nurburgring racetrack in Germany, the unofficial test bed used by dozens of manufacturers in developing performance cars.

All of which points to Mazda finally embarking on the crucial engineering work to continue the legendary RX lineage.