Holden Ute exports stymied by dollar

words - Bruce Newton
Foreign exchange rate will prevent exports of Holden's Ute to the USA as the Chevy El Camino

The chances of the Holden Ute being sold in North America as a reborn Chevrolet El Camino are being stymied by the high price of the Australian dollar.

Speaking at today's Detroit motor show, General Motors International Operations boss Tim Lee today expressed his support for the car but not the current expense of the Aussie dollar against the Greenback.

"I think here in the US that vehicle has a tremendous amount of cache so if we could (import it) we would if it makes sense," Mr Lee said.

"You tell me about what the Aussie dollar is going to do over the next 12 to 24 months and I'll tell you the export potential of cars like that."

However, with the Aussie dollar currently running at $1.05 against the US dollar, Mr Lee said: "You can't make a business case of something like that."

Speculation about the Commodore-based utes heading for the USA resurfaced last December when GM filed a trademark on the El Camino name. However, GM dismissed the move as routine paperwork.

GM also registed the Nomad trademark, which led to speculation that the Commodore Sportwagon was also a chance to head to the USA. The Nomad was a Chevrolet two-door wagon.

But Mr Lee said the Australian dollar would have to sink to 80 cents or lower to make the business case viable for the El Camino.

"We are in the business of making money; Great products, great margins - when we have a foreign exchange opportunity that makes sense."

Exporting cars from the Elizabeth plant to the USA is not impossible, as the Caprice-based Chevrolet PPV police car proves. Although it sells in low numbers, GM is persisting with the program.

Also, this year's upgraded VF Commodore is set launched in the USA as a luxury-appointed V8-only Chevy SS, with a racing version due to make its debut in NASCAR at the Daytona 500 in February.

"We will take a premium price position with the SS and the market will be what it will be," Mr Lee said. "In terms of how many we will sell I have no idea, but we will have to take a very premium price position."

Mr Lee said there was no prospect of GM building cars based on the Commodore's Australian-developed Zeta architecture in North America as a way of avoiding the foreign exchange challenges.

"We will not be investing one penny to implement the Zeta architecture in the United States," he said. "I am the chief manufacturing officer of the company - that is written in stone."

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