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Senate Democrats Vow to Defend Obama's Auto Efficiency Rules

by Ryan Beene

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- Lawmakers urge EPA's Pruitt to keep Obama-era rules in place
- Automakers crying 'crocodile tears' about effect of standards

Environmental groups and Senate Democrats are pushing back on possible moves by the Trump administration to weaken federal auto efficiency standards.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer joined 11 other Senate Democrats in signing a letter urging EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt to uphold agency regulations through 2025 that would slash vehicle greenhouse gas emissions, saying the rules are economically and technically achievable.

"Donald Trump is waging a war on the environment and he wants EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt to make strong fuel economy standards his newest victim," Senator Edward Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, said in conference call with reporters.

The EPA is said to be planning to reconsider a determination issued in the final days of Barack Obama's presidency that vehicle greenhouse gas emissions standards from 2022 to 2025 are appropriate. The move would reopen a review of the regulations that automakers argue was unfairly cut short.

If the administration then moves to weaken the rules, which aim to boost fuel economy to an average fleet rate of more than 50 miles per gallon by 2025, environmental groups vowed a legal challenge. Likewise, they say they will oppose a move reported by some news media that the Trump administration is considering revoking California's right to set its own auto-efficiency standards.

"If the administration teams up with the auto companies to weaken these standards," Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign, said during the call, "the environmental community and, I presume, the state of California as well will sue."

Automakers have lobbied Trump and Pruitt to reopen the review of the standards, arguing the rules are overly ambitious given low gasoline prices and other market factors.

"The auto industry is crying crocodile tears about their inability to meet these standards," Markey said. "They know they can meet them, they have been meeting them. They don't want to meet them. That's what this is all about."

Union of Concerned Scientists President Ken Kimmell warned that challenging California's waiver authority could be difficult and would lead to protracted litigation.

"There is no precedent for revoking a waiver that's already been granted as it has in this case, and I believe California and the other states would have an extremely strong case in court that it is arbitrary to take away that authority," Kimmell said on the call.

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