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Ford Faces Fire From Green Groups in Showdown Over Mileage Rules

By: Ryan Beene, October 25, 2017

(Bloomberg) -- Environmental and consumer advocates are taking aim at Ford Motor Co. in a public campaign saying the carmaker, which has highlighted its green efforts, is working with the Trump administration to weaken fuel efficiency standards it had already agreed to meet.

Groups including the Sierra Club, Public Citizen and Greenpeace singled out Ford in a call with reporters Wednesday, saying they will target the company in a public campaign to pressure the industry to drop efforts to fight the mileage standards, which were set under President Barack Obama.

"Ford and the other automakers seem to believe that they can betray that deal to the detriment of consumers and the environment," Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen. "When the auto companies and the Trump administration conspire to prevent that rule from moving forward, they are stealing thousands of dollars from each consumer."

The campaign marks an escalation in the effort by environmental and consumer advocates to preserve the Obama-era auto standards, which they contend carmakers can easily meet. Automakers say they support cleaner cars but want changes to account for consumer preferences, affordability and lower fuel costs than the agencies expected.

In an emailed statement, Ford spokeswoman Christin Baker said the company remains committed to reducing carbon emissions.

"The auto industry's collective support for tough fuel economy rules that were 13 years in the future was predicated on a sensible notion -- check half way through to make sure the data and the targets matched up," she said. "This is exactly what One National Program was designed to do -- consistent with the agreement made under President Obama."

Automakers agreed with federal regulators in 2011 to boost fuel economy to more than 50-mile-per-gallon fleet average by 2025. The deal included a midterm review to determine whether the final years of the program, from 2022-2025, were still appropriate.

Obama's EPA ended the midterm review in the last days of his administration and reaffirmed the standards, finding carmakers could meet them at lower cost than first thought. Automakers complained the review was unfairly ended more than a year before an April 2018 deadline and urged Trump to reinstate the review. Trump in March announced he would do just that.

Trump met with the chief executives of General Motors Co., Ford and Chrysler Automobiles NV at the White House in his first week in office. In the meeting, Ford's then-CEO Mark Fields told Trump that 1 million jobs could be at risk if the efficiency standards fail to align with consumer preferences.

That comment from Fields is part of the reason why the groups are targeting Ford, said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign.

"They invited him to attack these standards, that's what made them stand out from the pack," Becker said.

Fields discussed the closed-door conversation at an auto dealer convention days after the White House meeting, saying that he and the other auto chiefs did not ask Trump to repeal the standards but instead advocated for smoothing trouble spots in the rules and ensuring they account for consumer choices.