

BP Mess Is a Mileage Argument: Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang

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What do we do after BP Plc fixes the gusher in the Gulf of Mexico -- days, weeks or months from now? We tell them what to do with the rest of their oil: Keep it in the ground.

The Gulf spill is an environmental disaster that will happen again until we cut our addiction to oil. How do we wean ourselves? We toughen our fuel-economy and emissions standards so that automakers move beyond cars that depend on oil.

President Barack Obama was right to suspend new drilling. He should make that a permanent ban. He is also right that we won't get off oil in 10 years. But we never will if we don't try much harder. The long-term answer to this catastrophe can't be limited to a halt in dangerous deepwater drilling.

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In May 2009, the president took the biggest single step toward cutting the nation's reliance on oil and reducing global-warming pollution: He set the first greenhouse gas emissions standard for cars and light trucks and increased the fuel economy standard, from 27.5 mpg for cars and 22.2 mpg for light trucks to a new combined standard of 35.5 mpg by 2016. This will save 1.2 million barrels of oil a day by 2020, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.

But to protect our workers, coasts, sea life and the communities that depend on them -- not to mention our climate -- we must move aggressively beyond that toughened benchmark.

If the next standard boosts the current 4.3 percent yearly improvement in fuel economy to 5.5 percent from 2017 to 2025, we would ultimately save an additional 3.5 million barrels of oil a day, the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy has estimated.

Ready to Go

Getting there isn't rocket science; it's auto mechanics. Detroit has the technology to deliver cars that produce low or even no emissions. Better engines, transmissions and aerodynamics, plus hybrids and new electric vehicle technology, are ready for prime time.

But the automakers have never done more than the law requires. They will produce cars and light trucks powered by technology beyond the internal combustion engine only if the standards are tough enough.

Now that we, the American taxpayers, own most of General Motors Co. and a chunk of Chrysler Group LLC, they should help, not hinder, this effort. So should the chastened Toyota Motor Corp. They and other manufacturers should assign their best engineers instead of their top lobbyists.

To achieve a more stringent standard, no new laws are necessary. Congress and the Supreme Court have already given the president the tools he needs, including the Clean Air Act. He used them a year ago and has said he is willing to use them again.

Half the Fuel

On May 21, Obama stepped forward once more. Directing his administration to begin work on "a new and higher standard," he said: "I believe that it's possible, in the next 20 years, for vehicles to use half the fuel and produce half the pollution that they do today."

Detroit can do this and more.

At the president's charge, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, joined by the California Air Resources Board, are focusing on the standard that will take effect when the current regulations run out at the end of 2016.

California has led the way. It enacted tough standards in 2002 that became the foundation of the national rules the president announced last May. It is an indispensable player.

The tragedy in the Gulf and the looming disaster we face as the climate grows ever warmer underline the urgency to act boldly.

Cut the Bulk

U.S. automakers say they plan to produce safe, cleaner, less bulky cars and trucks. They have a good idea. If they cut the bulk, gas consumption will be reduced as well.

Other ideas aren't as good. Sarah Palin is inviting us to pillage the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; Canada is selling us millions of barrels of oil from its tar sands, a vast earth-and-sky-befouling operation. Both risk creating a Gulf-like catastrophe on land, while neither solves our problem. Addicts don't cure their addiction by finding new sources of drugs.

We need to move beyond cars fueled by oil. Keep in mind that many vehicles produced in 2025 under the next round of standards will still be on the road in 2040.

None of this will happen overnight. But the sooner we accelerate the effort, the sooner we'll accomplish the necessary changes, with cars that get us where we're going without ruining the environment.

A few years back, BP spent millions of dollars advertising its intention to move "Beyond Petroleum." Would that they had done so.

Don't drill for oil beneath the Gulf. Drill down into Detroit's capacity for innovation.

(Dan Becker is director of the Safe Climate Campaign, which advocates action to fight global warming. James Gerstenzang is the campaign's editorial director. The opinions expressed are their own.)

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