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Ford accused of mileage hypocrisy

By: Keith Liang, October 25, 2017

Washington — Environmentalists in Washington are accusing Ford Motor Co. of hypocrisy when it comes to auto fuel efficiency as they launch a campaign to save stringent gas mileage rules currently being reviewed by Trump administration.

They say the Dearborn automaker is publicly expressing its commitment to increasing the fuel performance of its new cars, but privately lobbying federal officials to roll back stringent gas mileage rules.

The mpg rules, which were enacted by the Obama administration in 2012, require automakers to achieve fleet-wide averages of more than 50 miles per gallon by 2025. In a victory for automakers, the Trump administration has reversed an Obama administration decision to finalize the rules for the model years between 2022 and 2025, reopening a review that was scheduled to take place in 2018.

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Margie Alt, executive director of Environment America, added: “As the best-selling car brand in the U.S., and one of our most historic auto manufacturers, Ford Motor Co. should be a leader, not a laggard, when it comes to getting zero-emission vehicles on the road.”

The complaints about Ford are at the center of a new campaign called “Forward, Not Backward” that was launched Wednesday by the Sierra Club, Public Citizen, Greenpeace, Safe Climate Campaign and Environment America. The groups say their aim is to convince Ford and other automakers to “stop working behind the scenes with the Trump administration to roll back the popular standards.”

Becker accused Ford of dragging its feet on boosting the fuel performance of its vehicles, in addition to lobbying the Trump administration to roll back the gas stringent mileage rules.

“Ford lags near the bottom of the heap on fuel efficiency and pollution,” he said. “It’s the third worst among the 12 major automakers. Ford fails to use the best technology on the bulk of its vehicles. It’s at the back of the pack on four of the six key efficiency technologies highlighted by EPA in its trends report.”

John Viera, global director of sustainability and vehicle environmental matters for Ford, vehemently disputed the allegation that his company is acting hypocritically when it comes to the gas mileage rules.

“If you go back to 2012, we didn’t commit to a 2025 number,” he said. “What we committed to was having a mid-term review to determine what the number was going to be for 2025. We’re not working behind the scenes to get (the rules) rolled back. We’re working to get all parties at the table, like we did in 2012.”

Viera pointed to announcements from Ford in recent years about plans to spend \$4.5 billion on “electrified vehicle solutions” by 2020 and introduce 13 new electric or hybrid vehicles globally in the next five years as evidence of the company’s commitment to fuel efficiency.

“Our company has shown a lot of leadership and initiative when it comes to fuel efficiency,” he said.

The gas mileage rules, which Ford and other automakers have said could be too ambitious, requires automakers to go from an average of over 35 miles per gallon for 2017 models to producing car and truck fleets that average more than 50 miles per gallon by 2025.

The environmental attack on Ford comes as green groups have released new polling showing drivers in Michigan and other states are in favor of keeping the gas mileage rules in place. The poll, conducted on behalf of the Natural Resources Defense Council, NextGen America and the Sierra Club, showed 73 percent of registered voters in Michigan are in favor of enforcing the gas mileage rules.

Industry observers say fuel economy appears to matter mostly on the margin in car purchasing decisions — drivers who are in the market for an SUV might compare mileage notes on various models, but not switch to smaller vehicle — but it has not historically been a tipping point.

Rebecca Lindland, senior analyst at Kelley Blue Book, said fuel economy typically ranks behind factors like durability, reliability and cargo space for most car buyers.

“It’s typically in the lower part of the top 10 reasons, especially when gas prices are low,” she said. “When gas prices increase, people are more concerned, but at the end of the day, things like utility, safety and cargo room still out rank fuel economy. What people want is a fuel efficient version of what they already want to buy.”

Environmentalists argue their new polling shows that research is out-of-date.

“Michiganders want cleaner, more efficient cars, not more air pollution and increased costs at the pump,” said Andrew Linhardt, deputy legislative director for transportation at the Sierra Club. “These rules are driving technological innovation, cutting dangerous pollution, saving families money, and reducing America’s reliance on oil.”

The mileage rules at issue call for automakers to achieve a fleetwide average mileage rate of more than 36 miles per gallon for cars and trucks in 2018. The standard then increases to more than 37 miles per gallon in 2019 and nearly 39 miles per gallon in 2020, which is the last year before automakers will have a chance to weigh in on the need for any course corrections.

The rules for mileage years 2022 and 2025 were by law originally set to be reviewed for their feasibility by April 2018, but the Trump administration has said it is also looking at the feasibility of the rules for the 2021 model year, by which automakers will be required to hit a combined average of 41 miles per gallon for their cars and trucks.

Under the current rules, automakers will face fines of \$5.50 for each one-tenth of a mile-per-gallon their average fuel economy falls short of the standard for a model year, multiplied by the total volume of vehicles sold under the new regulations.

Viera, the Ford sustainability director, said the Dearborn automaker and other manufacturers are just asking for the review of the mileage rules that they were promised in 2012, arguing that the Obama administration rushed to finalize the rules ahead of schedule.

“All we’re asking from the new administration was for them to reinstate the original timeline so we can have a data-driven review,” he said. “We’ve taken the position that other auto manufacturers have taken, so we’re not unique in that sense.”