

Op-Ed Bailed-out GM needs to rev up emissions effort



GM's overall gas mileage fails to keep up with any automaker except the much smaller Chrysler-Fiat. (Stan Hoda / AFP/Getty Images)

By **Daniel F. Becker and James Gerstenzang**

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Half a century ago Ralph Nader published “Unsafe at Any Speed,” which warned of the hazards built into the Chevrolet Corvair. Today, General Motors' safety record is still being justly vilified, most recently for an ignition defect blamed for at least 33 deaths. And a new report demonstrates the degree to which its vehicles are also unsafe for the climate.

GM's failure to substantially cut its vehicles' pollution threatens the success of the Obama administration's tough auto mileage and emissions rules, the biggest single step any nation has taken against global warming — and this after taxpayers bailed the company out of bankruptcy. The standards require the fleet of new cars and trucks sold in the United States in 2025 to average 54.5 mpg. Achieving this is auto mechanics, not rocket science. GM could start down the right path by using on-the-shelf technology.

For every gallon of gasoline consumed, whether in a mileage-leading Toyota Prius hybrid or a guzzling Chevy Suburban, about 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, the chief global warming pollutant, is pumped into the atmosphere. Extracting and refining the fuel bring the cost to 25 pounds. Cutting tailpipe emissions by improving mileage is a crucial step to limiting climate change.

How does GM stack up against its domestic and foreign competitors?

No automaker deserves a prize for environmental excellence. An Environmental Protection Agency report on auto mileage and emissions published last month makes that clear. But in four key areas, according to the document, "Light-Duty Automotive Technology, Carbon Dioxide Emissions and Fuel Economy Trends," GM is at the back of the pack.

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It has made the least fuel-efficiency improvements; it has trailed key competitors in adopting advanced gas-saving technology; and its trucks get the worst mileage, a projected 18.8 mpg in 2014 — a particularly significant number because the SUVs, vans and pickups make up nearly half its production. And, most important, GM's overall gas mileage fails to keep up with any automaker except the much smaller Chrysler-Fiat.

The EPA projects that Ford's 2014 vehicles will average 23.4 mpg, GM's 22.0 mpg, and Chrysler-Fiat's 21.1 mpg. But from 2012 to 2014, Chrysler's overall fuel efficiency will have improved 1.0 mpg and Ford's 0.6 mpg. GM? It is essentially flat-lining, improving its mileage by only 0.3 mpg over the three years.

By comparison, Nissan, which, like GM and the other U.S. manufacturers, produces a full line of cars and trucks, is expected to reach 26.8 mpg this year, a 0.6-mpg improvement, according to the federal agency, while Mazda's 2014 fleet mileage leads the industry at 28.8 mpg, 6.8 mpg ahead of GM.

GM can begin to catch up with other manufacturers by accelerating its use of such energy-saving technologies as efficient engines and transmissions and high-strength, lightweight materials that competitors are building into their vehicles.

Indeed, the EPA report highlights auto manufacturers that make the greatest use of eight key gas-saving

technologies, among them turbocharging, gas-electric hybrid engines and efficient continuously variable transmissions. GM fails to reach the top three in seven categories and leads in only one: cylinder deactivation, a technology that shuts down cylinders when the engine does not need them.

To fulfill President Obama's promise to address global warming, the key federal agencies responsible for implementing his auto standards — the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration — must push GM to deliver an environmental performance within both the letter of the mileage and emissions program, which the company is, and its spirit, which GM is not.

General Motors has a responsibility to do more than the bare minimum the law requires. It is the largest car company in the United States; it plays a dominant role within the industry; it faces strong competition from greener foreign manufacturers; and for a strong future, it must attract a new generation of potential buyers, which studies show is more environmentally conscious than previous generations.

The auto industry's recent history tells us that building cleaner cars can protect the bottom line as well as the environment. But for more than two decades, GM has relied on SUVs and pickups to boost profits. When the economy went into steep recession, we saw where that business model left the automaker: Customers fled its showrooms in search of cars that cost less to run. With sales plummeting, the company declared bankruptcy.

The U.S. treasury saved GM with a \$49.5-billion bailout. But we didn't rescue the company so it could continue to make unsafe gas guzzlers. It isn't sufficient for federal agencies to merely monitor the company's performance or for the salvaged GM to return to business as usual. The company must be a leader, not a laggard, and put its engineers to work creating the safest and cleanest vehicles on the road. The Obama administration must make sure they do. We deserve cars and trucks that harm neither their occupants nor the climate.

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