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Opinion

Future cars, now

California's Air Resources Board should set standards that push the industry beyond old under-the-hood technology to achieve cleaner, more efficient cars.

April 02, 2010 | By Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang



Two federal agencies, working with California, have taken the biggest step in the nation's history to reduce the United States' global warming footprint. On Thursday, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration announced specific rules that require automakers to build cars, SUVs and minivans that will average 35.5 mpg by 2016 and cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 30%, thereby saving an estimated 1.8 billion barrels of oil.

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It's been a long haul. For a dozen years, the auto industry stymied efforts in Washington to improve fuel economy standards. California stepped in, enacting its own emissions law in 2002 under the federal Clean Air Act. Last May, President Obama instructed the EPA and NHTSA to use the California benchmark to set new national standards for fuel economy and emissions.

These national rules are a good step forward, but they're not enough. Now it is time for California to show the way again.

Vehicles in the United States release more global warming pollution than all but five countries. Given the greenhouse gases spewed along the nation's roadways, the cost of importing oil and the risk of relying on overseas supplies, we must start working on and adopt a next generation of fuel economy and emissions standards that begin to wean us off internal combustion engines.

Let's move beyond under-the-hood technology that is already more than a century old. We need to develop rules that will begin the shift to electric cars, or even fuel cells, while we also clean up the electric power plants on which they will rely.

Given the three to five years it takes to design and produce new models, and how long automakers have managed to delay the new standards, it is time to start working on rules that would phase in from 2017 to 2025. Some of the vehicles they shape will still be on the road in 2040.

This is where California comes in. Its Air Resources Board has begun analyzing the next standards it could set. These would be the second round of improvements under the law pioneered in 2002 by state Sen. Fran Pavley (D-Agoura Hills) when she was a member of the Assembly. We encourage the board to act as though the world depends on these standards. It does.

Less-polluting passenger cars should be available for those who want them. It is up to the auto industry to develop the next generation of technology to provide them, along with SUVs and pickups. And it is government's role to set the standards that push industry to meet this goal.

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This shift, beginning with 2017 models, will not just determine what will eventually replace today's gas guzzlers. It also will improve energy security, the economy and the environment.

Europe is cutting auto emissions further and faster than we are. Europeans manage quite nicely with smaller cars -- on the high-speed Autobahn, no less -- and with few SUVs and pickups.

U.S. automakers have announced that they will make smaller cars and trucks. They are right to rethink size. Less bulk means less gas consumed.

That would be a change -- if it happens.

One major reason cars are not more efficient today is weight. Compared with vehicles built in 2000, the EPA reports, 2009 models are heavier (by 167 pounds) and more muscular (with 19% more horsepower).

To cut global warming, the auto companies must build clean, smaller cars -- without sacrificing safety. Safety is a function of design and technology, not just of size.

Air bags are a good example of how better safety technology is saving lives. The number of large SUVs and pickups has grown over the past two decades, as has the number of SUV-car collisions. Yet injuries and deaths in passenger cars have fallen by nearly half since 1989, according to NHTSA.

By adopting strict rules, Americans won't have to import fuel-efficient vehicles. Detroit can build them, giving us choices beyond gas guzzlers. At the same time, we'd be creating jobs for American workers making cars and light trucks that could compete in the marketplace.

We have the right to demand safe cars that pollute less. If automakers get it right, they will make cars people want. Having supported the industry with billions in bailouts and cash for clunkers, Americans don't want to hear "no" from Detroit anymore.

The auto industry is at a crossroads: Do we move it down the path of safer, less polluting, more efficient vehicles, or do we allow the companies to continue on the course that led some of them to bankruptcy and ignominy?

Getting the next generation of cars right isn't just good for the planet. It's good for American jobs. It's good for the economy. It's even good for the carmakers.

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