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Strengthen the rules against auto pollution

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Over the past eight years, strong mileage-and-emissions rules have improved auto efficiency by 5 miles per gallon, saving Americans money even after the cost of gas-saving technology is factored into car prices. Under the rules, the United States has cut oil use and reduced global warming pollution.

Despite its fearful warnings that the standards would cost autoworkers jobs, the auto industry has added nearly 700,000 positions during this period, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Now, taking advantage of technology, we need to strengthen the standards to protect consumers and the climate.

A [report](#) issued last month by the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration documents two crucial facts in the program, which is central to the Obama administration's effort against climate change: The government's cost estimates are on target — or may even have been too high — and there is ample technology on automakers' shelves to meet these anti-pollution standards and go beyond them.

But automakers have declared war on the rules. Their aggressive sales of pickups and SUVs forced the government to weaken its projection that the 2025 new-car fleet would average 54.5 m.p.g. The report says the fleet is now expected to average 50 to 52.6 m.p.g.

The automakers complain that with low gasoline prices, they aren't selling as many efficient vehicles as they must. They should stop whining about gas prices. If they really wanted to sell efficient cars, they wouldn't be spending a Suburban-sized share of their marketing budget — which totals \$15 billion annually, according to Kantar Media — pushing Americans into gas-guzzling trucks. And they wouldn't be trying to weaken the rules.

The industry says that making a fleet of efficient vehicles will be difficult and expensive. But the government's report shows that gas-saving technology may even be \$250 cheaper than the administration projected in 2012, when it negotiated the rules with automakers, and that additional cost-effective technologies have come on line since then. At that time, the administration did not expect the significant gas and pollution savings that continuously variable transmissions, cylinder deactivation, wider use of mild hybrid systems and advanced Atkinson cycle engines are already delivering.

Of the two agencies that studied the program, EPA did a more thorough analysis that undercuts the auto industry's cost arguments. It reflects careful technical assessments by its experts, augmented by more than a dozen engineers hired from industry.

The environmental agency's work included so-called "teardown" studies, which allowed the agency to analyze technology costs independent of automaker claims, and updated studies of efficient engines and transmissions.

It's no surprise that auto companies are trying to apply the brakes to needed, achievable progress. When the industry signed onto the program, auto executives insisted on the review. And even as they stood at President Obama's side when he unveiled the rules, they privately called the mid-point assessment their "off-ramp" from the standards.

For more than two decades, automakers fended off tougher rules. They relaxed their opposition only when California set its own standards. Now, if automakers are able to weaken the standards, California and allied states should exercise their authority to set their own rules to protect their citizens.

Obama's program is the biggest single step any nation has taken to fight global warming. Based on the plethora of low-cost gas-saving technologies, there is no excuse not to improve efficiency by strengthening the standards. We can't accept backsliding or loopholes that undermine their success just to put more trucks on the road.

Automakers have paid a terrible price for preventing progress. Taxpayers shelled out \$85 billion to bail General Motors and Chrysler out of bankruptcy. The industry is making the same mistakes that led it into dire straits just eight years ago. By relying too heavily on sales of massive gas-guzzlers, it will again threaten industry jobs when gas prices rise or tastes change, as they inevitably will.

Cutting pollution isn't rocket science. It's auto mechanics. Rather than weaken its projections, the administration must strengthen the rules. Americans will keep money in their wallets, pollution out of the atmosphere, and oil in the ground.

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