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Stalling on Fuel Efficiency

By DANIEL F. BECKER and JAMES GERSTENZANG MARCH 10, 2016

THE Obama administration's stringent fuel efficiency standards are intended to reduce auto pollution and drive up gas mileage. They are the biggest single step any nation has taken to fight global warming. The rules worked well, at first. They no longer do. They can be fixed.

The repairs are all the more important since the Supreme Court last month put a hold on the administration's plan to limit pollution from coal-fired power plants.

The fuel-economy standards are designed to deliver a new-car fleet averaging 54.5 m.p.g. in 2025. But this goal is in jeopardy as automakers increase the production of gas-guzzling light trucks, minivans and most S.U.V.s, which are subject to less stringent standards than other cars. These vehicles are driving up oil consumption and pollution and putting at risk American compliance with the Paris climate accord.

Two recent government reports provide ample evidence that to cut carbon dioxide emissions, the administration must strengthen the fuel-efficiency standards for those vehicles. It should also close loopholes that allow automakers to thwart the intent of the fuel standards while following the letter of the regulations.

Under the rules, fuel efficiency rose five miles per gallon from 2007 to 2013. But reports from the Environmental Protection Agency show no overall improvement in 2014 models, the most recent year for which data is available. And with the production of S.U.V.s, pickups and minivans continuing to rise, fuel efficiency and emissions for 2015 vehicles most likely grew worse, though we won't

be able to confirm that until December.

This news comes as the government begins an evaluation of the rules that could result in changes for 2021 through 2025. Our concern is that the auto industry will use the review, which it sought when the standards were first set, to delay or weaken the rules.

The fuel efficiency standards do not set overall pollution or mileage targets. Instead, they provide a sliding scale that allows for weaker mileage and emissions rules for company fleets as the automakers increase their truck production.

As a result, although the fuel economy for light trucks increased by .6 miles per gallon in 2014, the increased production of these vehicles, which rose by 5 percent, offset the overall, fleetwide benefit of other, more efficient vehicles.

In the end, the 2014 fleet of cars and trucks averaged 30.7 m.p.g., just as it did in 2013. By stalling improvements in efficiency, the auto industry continues to put the climate at risk. From well to wheels, burning a gallon of gasoline spews 25 pounds of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Of all the major automakers, American companies delivered the worst fleetwide mileage. Ford's fuel efficiency was 9.2 m.p.g. worse than the industry leader, Mazda, which achieved 37.9 m.p.g. G.M. and Fiat Chrysler were worse than Ford. Only Honda and Hyundai were in full compliance with the standards without resorting to loopholes. One of these loopholes allows automakers to get credit for higher fuel efficiency for flexible fuel vehicles, even though those vehicles generally don't achieve that improved efficiency.

This is auto mechanics, not rocket science. To make more efficient vehicles, carmakers can deploy existing technologies, including better engines and transmissions, and improved aerodynamics and materials. High-strength, lightweight metals have shaved 150 pounds from the average vehicle. Automakers can cut at least twice that with no impact on safety, says Clarence M. Ditlow III, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety. (Our organization is affiliated with his group.)

Although automakers increased their use of fuel efficiency technology in 2014,

they deployed it in only a few models, while outfitting their S.U.V.s and other light trucks with cheaper, outdated equipment. More than three-quarters of Subarus and Nissans use highly efficient continuously variable transmissions, but Ford, G.M. and Chrysler use them in only a small fraction of their fleet. BMW, Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz use turbochargers, which maximize engine efficiency, in a majority of their vehicles. Ford employs turbochargers in nearly 50 percent of its fleet, but G.M. and Chrysler have left them largely on the shelf.

And for every piece of efficient technology they ignore, automakers install another cup holder or electronic gizmo, jack up the price and increase profits by saddling buyers with a 20th-century product in 21st-century wrapping.

The Obama administration's mileage-and-emissions program can do more than any current measure to keep greenhouse gas pollution out of the atmosphere.

One way to fix the problems that have slowed progress would be to establish a so-called backstop during the midterm review, which is just getting underway. Under it, automakers would be required to produce a fleet that cuts carbon dioxide emissions by six billion tons, achieving the administration's original antipollution target.

The auto industry owes taxpayers that much, after the \$85 billion government bailout that saved General Motors and Chrysler from bankruptcy.

If the rules achieve their goal, they will cut our payments at the pump, saving consumers as much as \$8,000 even after they pay for the technology that delivers better mileage; ease our oil addiction; and keep six billion tons of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. We can't afford to let automakers stop this progress.

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