



Strengthen fuel-efficiency standards

The weak rules car companies favor would hurt consumers and the climate

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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 also 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 about 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 the 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 mpg. The report says the fleet is now expected to average 50 mpg to 52.6 mpg.

The automakers whine that, with low gasoline prices, they aren't selling as many efficient vehicles as they must. But if they really wanted to sell efficient cars, they wouldn't be spending a Suburban-sized share of their marketing budget — which totals an estimated \$15 billion annually — pushing Americans into gas-guzzling trucks. And they wouldn't be trying to weaken the rules.

The industry complains that making a fleet of efficient vehicles is too difficult and expensive. But the government 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 additional cost-effective technologies have come on line since then. At the time, the administration did not expect the significant gas and pollution savings that already are being delivered by continuously variable transmissions, cylinder deactivation, wider use of hybrid systems and advanced Atkinson cycle engines.

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

The EPA'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 Barack 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.

Mr. 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. The industry is making the same mistakes that led it into dire straits just eight years ago, when taxpayers had to lend \$85 billion to General Motors and Chrysler to keep them out of bankruptcy. By relying too heavily on sales of massive gas-guzzlers, the industry will lose money and jobs again when gas prices rise or tastes change, as they inevitably will.

Cutting pollution isn't rocket science. It's auto mechanics. If the administration strengthens the rules, Americans will keep money in their wallets, pollution out of the atmosphere and oil in the ground.

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<http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2016/08/01/Strengthen-fuel-efficiency-standards/stories/201607290081>