



This is Obama's chance to break his predecessors' chain of failure, the author writes.

Obama can halt our oil addiction

By DAN BECKER and JAMES GERSTENZANG | 06/09/11 09:51 PM EDT

As gas prices float near their all-time high and unrest roils the Middle East, President Barack Obama's advisers are in the final stages of preparing recommendations for a proposal that will slash our oil addiction, save consumers billions at the pump and help fight global warming. Or not.

In the coming weeks, they are to decide how tough or weak to make the next standards governing fuel efficiency and emissions of cars and light trucks sold in the United States.

The president is likely to make no more far-reaching decisions concerning the environment and climate change between now and Election Day. This could be his only big opportunity to address the nation's oil addiction and what consumers pay at the pump, so it could trigger the toughest clash of his tenure between environmentalists and the auto industry.

But this decision offers Obama the chance to keep his promise to cut the nation's oil use and to make auto companies competitive. It also carries the potential to energize — or turn off — the young voters who helped power him to office.

Under current rules, which run through 2016, automakers must cut the carbon dioxide pollution

their vehicles produce by 5 percent a year. Now, the administration is considering new rules, running from 2017 to 2025. These could cut emissions from 3 percent to 6 percent, resulting in corresponding yearly improvements in gas mileage.

The auto industry favors a 3 percent annual cut. National security, consumer and environmental groups support 6 percent. Polls show overwhelming public support for strong standards.

The difference is a big deal — even beyond the environmental benefit that the larger cut would deliver: less carbon dioxide pollution and less smog.

Consider the savings in oil and dollars.

If emissions are reduced 6 percent, U.S. consumers would use 217 million fewer barrels of oil in 2025 than if the administration opts for 3 percent and would pay \$16 billion less to foreign oil producers. For every percentage point below 6 percent, we send them an additional \$5.5 billion.

So it's an easy choice for Obama: Keep it here or send it there?

If emissions decrease 6 percent annually — and mileage improves 6 percent a year — the country would save \$645 billion at the pump from 2017 to 2030, if gasoline costs \$3.50 per gallon, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. If gas costs more, the savings would be even greater. Surely, there is something better we can do with \$645 billion than spend it on oil.

In 2025, this technology would produce an overall fleet of cars and light trucks averaging 62 mpg, according to the government's calculation. Muammar Qadhafi and General Motors may not applaud, but it would help curb our oil habit and ease the pain of \$4 gas.