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# Column: Detroit owes us better mileage



When President

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Obama signs tough new auto mileage and emissions standards in coming days, the United States will take the biggest single step of any nation to combat global warming. It's a great deal, but automakers must behave responsibly. If they shun their gasquzzling ways, they can assure its success.



By Dan Becker, and James Gerstenzang

By Grant Hindsley, AP

Teresa Jones pays the price in Los Angeles on Aug 10

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That means new car gas mileage will nearly double by 2025 to 54.5 mpg from current mileage.

Because better mileage means saving money at the pump, consumers will come out ahead by at least \$8,000 per car compared with vehicles on the road today, even after paying the cost of gas-saving technology. The program will halve emissions of carbon dioxide, the biggest contributor to climate change, and cut our risky reliance on oil oligarchs. And, it will create jobs — 570,000 by 2030, according to the Blue-Green Alliance, a labor and environmental coalition.

Fortunately, this is auto mechanics, not rocket science.

The automakers have the improved engines,

transmissions and aerodynamics to safely meet the stringent new standards. They have been on Detroit shelves for years.

Greener vehicles are already making money and stepping up the competition among companies: General Motors' top-selling car is the compact 30 mpg Chevrolet Cruze. Ford is about to go grill-to-grill with Toyota, offering its C-Max hybrid station wagon as direct competition for the new 42 mpg Prius V wagon.

That is a good start. Rising phoenix-like, the domestic auto industry now recognizes it is competing in a global market with companies already making hybrids, electric vehicles and other efficient models.

Aided by \$80 billion in taxpayer-funded bailouts, it might have begun to learn a crucial lesson: A profitable future lies in clean, high-tech vehicles.

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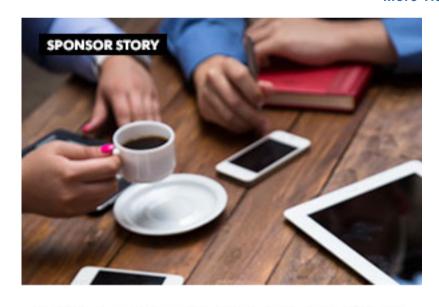
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Even so, automakers need to be watched. Even as they signed on to the president's signal environmental achievement, their lobbying won loopholes. The rules set weaker requirements for fleets with larger vehicles, favoring U.S. car companies, which build mostly large models. The standards use a sliding scale based on size to determine how much each company's fleet must improve mileage and cut emissions. A company that shifts to big cars from compacts has leeway to produce a fleet that falls below 54.5 mpg.

This flexibility was the price Detroit demanded to support Obama's program. It is this loophole that gives the companies the power to determine how successful the standards turn out to be.

Is the industry ready for this responsibility? Its history gives Americans reason to wonder.

For decades, car makers fought a strong national mileage standard. They pushed thirsty but money-making SUVs

and pickups that rarely hauled cargo heavier than a Starbucks latte. Their opposition eased only after they faced stringent emissions rules from California and 12 other states, the challenge of selling gas hogs to drivers paying \$4 a gallon, and bankruptcy reorganization brought on largely by relying on trucks consumers shunned.

Having agreed to support a strong national mileage and emissions plan, the auto industry is at a crossroad. It could drive itself back into a ditch, turning out new fleets with the same old gas-guzzlers that ignore what consumers want and the environment needs. Or it could seize the opportunity to turn itself around, taking the wheel as America fights global warming and its oil habit.

After pocketing \$80 billion in taxpayer bailouts, Detroit owes us responsible behavior. The U.S. needs to cut its oil addiction. Drivers want to save on gas. We all need a safer climate. Automakers hold the key.

Dan Becker is director of the Safe Climate Campaign, where James Gerstenzang, who covered the environment for the Los Angeles Times, is editorial director.

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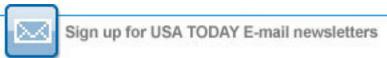
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