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Obama administration will keep tough fuel standards in place

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The Obama administration says it plans to stick with strict fuel economy standards for cars and light trucks for the model years 2022 to 2025, despite protests from some automakers and concern about how the incoming Trump administration might alter them.

Environmental Protection Agency administrator Gina McCarthy on Wednesday proposed leaving the current standards in place, saying an extensive technical analysis had shown that automakers are well positioned to meet the greenhouse gas emissions targets that were established in 2012 with the goal of reducing pollution and nearly doubling fuel economy. EPA officials noted that the agency's analysis showed that manufacturers should be able to meet the standards at even lower costs than initially anticipated — and, indeed, that dozens of models of cars already do.

McCarthy said in a statement that the decision to adhere to the standards would give automakers “regulatory certainty” and could save U.S. drivers billions of dollars at the pump.

In a call with reporters on Wednesday, Janet McCabe, EPA's acting assistant administrator for the Office of Air and Radiation, was asked repeatedly whether the agency was trying to lock in the new regulations now, for fear that the Trump administration might try to roll them back once in office. She insisted that McCarthy had made the decision based on extensive technical assessment showing that manufacturers could meet the requirements and that American consumers would benefit.

“She's not speaking to anything a future administration may or may not do,” McCabe said, adding: “There has been years' worth of work to get us to this point. There isn't a reason at this point to consider changing the standards . . . We think there is tremendous support for the clean car program.”

The decision marks the culmination of a “midterm review” of fuel-efficiency standards that were designed to reshape the motor vehicle fleet and more than double fuel efficiency by 2025. In setting the standards, the Obama administration in 2012 agreed to auto industry demands that the targets be reexamined for technological and economic feasibility and possibly reset in 2017. But

the administration said the possibility meant that the regulations could be tightened as well as loosened.

Earlier this summer, a technical assessment by the EPA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that the fuel-efficiency standards championed by President Obama in 2012 would probably fall short of the 54.5-miles-per-gallon target for 2025, in part because consumers were buying more sport-utility vehicles and pickup trucks than expected. But the same report states that no technological or economic barrier prevented automakers from continuing to improve fuel economy and cut back on emissions.

The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers (AAM) had been pressing for loosening the standards, while experts concerned about climate change sought to protect what was seen as one of Obama's most significant steps to contain greenhouse gas emissions, while bolstering U.S. energy security.

On Wednesday, “nobody got everything they wanted,” said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign.

Environmental activists, however, praised the EPA's decision, which, if finalized, will make it more difficult and time-consuming should the Trump administration seek to weaken the existing standards.

“Today, EPA made sure that automakers keep delivering cars that are exponentially less polluting and more efficient,” Aminah Zaghab of the advocacy group Environment America said in a statement. “Transportation is the number one source of global warming pollution in this country. Today's announcement protects our health and environment by ensuring our cars will get much cleaner over the coming years.”

Auto industry representatives, meanwhile, accused the EPA of hastening its preliminary determination before a new administration takes office.

“This extraordinary and premature rush to judgment circumvents the serious analysis necessary to make sure the [emissions] standards appropriately balance fuel efficiency, carbon reduction, affordability and employment,” AAM said in a statement. “The evidence is abundantly clear that with low gas prices, consumers are not choosing the cars necessary to comply with increasingly unrealistic standards. Wishing this fact away does no one any favors, and getting this wrong has serious implications.”

The EPA said it will take public comments on its decision until Dec. 30.

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