

# Truck Sales Boom as Emissions Push Climate to the Brink

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By Dan Becker (/author/itemlist/user/45040) and James Gerstenzang (/author/itemlist/user/45039), Truthout | Op-Ed

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**Jose Munoz, executive vice president of Nissan and chairman of Nissan North America, reveals the Nissan Titan Warrior concept at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Michigan, January 12, 2016. (Photo: Fabrizio Costantini / The New York Times)**

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The auto industry spends roughly \$15 billion on marketing ([http://gaia.adage.com/images/bin/pdf/Kantarmedia\\_AutomotiveMarketing.pdf](http://gaia.adage.com/images/bin/pdf/Kantarmedia_AutomotiveMarketing.pdf)) annually, according to Kantar Media. Ads for gas-guzzlers are ubiquitous on the web, in print and on television. And sales of SUVs, minivans and other light trucks are surging -- up nearly 10 percent in the first two months of 2016 compared with 2015, according to Automotive News.

Coincidence? Probably not. Automakers don't invest that kind of cash because they want to enrich the media. They do it because it sells cars -- or, actually, mostly trucks.

It's worth considering as the auto industry whines that consumer demand for trucks will make it nearly impossible, if not impossible, to meet the tough fuel efficiency standards to which it agreed. In 2012, the Obama administration -- with auto industry support -- took the biggest single step of any nation against global warming and set us on the path to a fleetwide average of 54.5 miles per gallon.

**The climate doesn't care about the price of gas; it's all about the emissions.**

The automakers say their truck sales are nothing more than a response to consumers' readiness to plunk down big bucks for those pickups, SUVs and minivans because gas costs less than a year

ago. To be sure, gas prices have dropped, and the behemoths that the industry is peddling as "family cars" are cheaper to run than they were a year or two ago. Never mind that vehicles designed to haul lumber aren't lumbering along with anything larger than a couple of 20-ounce lattes.

What we must keep in mind is this: The climate doesn't care about the price of gas; it's all about the emissions.

And this: If low fuel prices alone sold gas-guzzlers, the automakers wouldn't have to devote to truck sales an increasing portion of an advertising budget that rivals the national budget of Uruguay

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_government\\_budgets\\_by\\_country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_government_budgets_by_country)).

"Low gas prices are not causing shoppers to suddenly say 'I was going to buy a Chevy Sonic, but with \$2 a gallon gas, I'll buy a Silverado pickup instead,'" Autotrader.com senior analyst Michelle Krebs (<http://www.freep.com/story/money/cars/mark-phelan/2015/02/14/fuel-economy-gas-price-oil/23322951/>) told the Detroit Free Press. Rather, she said that as truck sales boomed last year, "Consumers choose a vehicle based on a variety of needs, with fuel economy being one. They recognize that gas prices can go up again."

The mileage-and-emissions rules that have just begun to clean up our fleet are up for review -- an assessment the industry demanded. Privately (and tellingly), industry chiefs have called this review, taking place with the program barely underway, the automakers' "exit ramp" from the rules' highway to cleaner air and less global warming pollution. That's not what we deserve from an industry that was happy to pocket \$85 billion in bailouts (<http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2015/04/17/rubio-criticizes-billion-auto-bailout/25950819/>) from the taxpayers.

The review comes as the industry is trying to wipe off the stains of the Volkswagen scandal. The German automaker disclosed in September 2015 that it had installed devices that allowed its diesels to cheat on critical emissions tests. The company lied about its cheating to government officials in the United States and Europe for more than a year. It has become the poster child for the industry's hostility to strong anti-pollution rules.

The standards were drawn up to cut auto pollution, deliver a fleet with steadily increasing gas mileage and give the United States a leading role in the climate change fight. We wrote in an op-ed in The New York Times that they "worked well, at first. They no longer do. They can be fixed."

Last month, the Supreme Court stalled implementation of the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan, a key step -- like the auto rules -- toward ending climate pollution. Now, the court's action makes the proper functioning of the auto rules all the more important.

Outlining the importance of the rules and a reasonable course to improving them, we wrote in the Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/opinion/stalling-on-fuel-efficiency.html>):

The fuel-economy standards are designed to deliver a new-car fleet averaging 54.5 mpg in 2025. But this goal is in jeopardy as automakers increase the production of gas-guzzling light trucks, minivans and most SUVs, 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 the reports from the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] show no overall improvement in 2014 models

(<https://www3.epa.gov/fueleconomy/fetrends/1975-2015/420r15016.pdf>), the most recent year for which data is available. And with the production of SUVs, pickups and minivans continuing to rise, fuel efficiency and emissions for 2015 vehicles most likely grew worse ... [Government figures for 2015 models won't be available until the end of this year.]

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Meanwhile, the EPA, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the California Air Resources Board are gearing up to determine whether the rules are meeting their goals -- and, most important, whether they must be modified or can be strengthened.

Be prepared to hear more from carmakers whining that consumer demand (which it spends billions to create) won't let it sell clean cars.

The auto industry must not be allowed to put the brakes on crucial progress or throw this program -- so critical in the fight against global warming -- into reverse.

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