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Officials say 35.5 m.p.g. rule will cut foreign oil demand, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and save drivers money.

By Mark Clayton, Staff writer | SEPTEMBER 15, 2009

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The [Obama administration](#) Tuesday trumpeted the nation's first-ever greenhouse gas emissions standards for vehicles, which it said clarifies rules for automakers and takes a big step toward meeting climate change and energy security goals.

The new regulations tie emissions and fuel economy standards together, requiring the new light-duty vehicle fleet to average 35.5 miles per gallon by 2016, four years sooner than the 2020 deadline set by Congress in 2007.

The new mileage-and-emissions rule means new cars must for the first time emit no more than 250 grams of carbon dioxide per mile. That will cut 950 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions while also improving fuel consumption -- cutting US oil demand by 1.8 billion barrels, officials said.

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Will drivers save money?

So even if cars and light trucks cost up to \$1,300 more as a result of new technology additions, they will also pay for themselves more quickly, saving new car owners more than \$3,000 in fuel costs, the [White House](#) said.

“American drivers will keep more money in their pockets, put less pollution into the air, and help reduce a dependence on oil that sends billions of dollars out of our economy every year,” [EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson](#) said in prepared remarks. “We have crafted a path forward that is win-win for our health, our environment, and our economy.”

The White House unveiling of the new rule featuring Ms. Jackson and [Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood](#) was clearly intended as a high profile event to put the Obama administration’s stamp on US energy and environment policy.

Environmentalists agreed, hailing the move as a landmark.

“Keeping President Obama’s promise, today’s proposed clean car rule is the biggest single step the US has taken to curb global warming and our oil addiction,” says [Dan Becker](#), director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the [Center for Auto Safety](#) in [Washington](#). “It demonstrates to the world that the [United States](#) is now confronting the threat of global warming.”

But automakers, too, sounded a positive note.

“This historic joint rule-making proposal released today by the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) and the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) creates a coordinated national approach for increasing fuel economy and reducing greenhouse gases and prevents competing regulations at the state and federal level,” said [Dave McCurdy](#), president of the Auto Alliance, a trade association of eleven car and truck manufacturers.

New rule patterns [California's](#) tough standard

The new rule effectively brings US auto emissions limits into line with California’s tough air pollution requirements, resolving a dispute over whether California could go its own way. That led to a Bush administration



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decision last year that limited the state's ability to regulate auto emissions, but has been now reversed. The Obama administration now has one overall standard for the US rather than three -- one for the EPA, the [Department of Transportation](#), and states.

After a 60-day public comment period, EPA and DOT will be required to finalize the new standards by the end of March. Mr. Becker warns that the "devil was in the details" and that the rule must not be riddled with loopholes and exceptions.

For example, the plan includes flexibility mechanisms that automakers have previously used to avoid meeting standards. With the new plug-in electric vehicles, the proposed rules don't count greenhouse gas emissions connected to generating the electricity needed to charge the vehicles.

Still, there was enthusiasm at the gains.

"You have to go back to the days of disco to see a fuel economy improvement like this," exulted [Jim Kliesch](#), a senior engineer at the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) (UCS) clean vehicle program.

Better vehicle mileage should help cut oil imports

The UCS projects the new standards would:

- Cut US oil consumption by about 1.3 million barrels per day by 2020, about as much as the US today imports from [Saudi Arabia](#).
- Slash greenhouse gas emissions by 217 million metric tons in 2020, about the same as taking 32 million cars off the road that year.
- Save drivers \$26 billion at the pump at a gas price of \$2.25 -- even after paying the higher cost for vehicle technology gains. If the cost of gas were \$4 a gallon, the standards would save around \$60 billion.

Rather than a hardship for industry, the president argued that the new rule would set a clear standard that would help US automakers make strides.

"This action will give our auto companies some long-overdue clarity, stability, and predictability," Mr. Obama said in prepared remarks Tuesday at a [General Motors](#) assembly plant in [Lordstown, Ohio](#).

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