

Car Talk

Fuel Economy Gains Slowing Down--Blame the Trucks and Muscle Cars

[RSS](#)

[**Jim Motavalli**](#)

Oct 14, 2014 ([Archives](#))

[12 Comments](#)

[fuel economy](#), [regulation](#)

First the good news: Fuel economy for new American cars [has shot up 26 percent in the last seven years](#), after stagnating for decades.



The Dodge Challenger Hellcat makes a neck-snapping 707 horsepower, and the respectful 22 mpg on the highway is offset by just 13 in town. (Chrysler photo)

The improvement in fuel economy—from 20.1 to 25.3 mpg—is saving billions of gallons of gas and, not surprisingly, keeping billions of pounds of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, say researchers Michael Sivak and Brandon Schoettle at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute. They caution, though, that "window-sticker values are only EPA estimates, and some drivers will not achieve them," Sivak said. (We'd go so far as to say many drivers. But, that's been the case for years, so the gain remains reasonably impressive.)

Automakers aren't improving fuel economy just because it's the right thing to do, or because consumers demand it. They're motivated—big time—by a federal rule that requires them to achieve 54.5 mpg as a fleet average in 2025. The last time I looked at a calendar, that date was only 11 years off.

Are we close to achieving that virtuous standard? No. And that's the bad news.

The Environmental Protection Agency's fuel efficiency Trends Report is out, and it reveals a tiny 0.1 percent improvement in fuel economy between the 2013 and 2014 auto fleets. That report uses unadjusted sales numbers that have economy moving from an average of 30.6 to 30.7 mpg.

Yes, that's one tenth of one percent. Fuel economy gains appear to be slowing, after some big jumps, thanks to widespread use of new technology such as "start-stop" engine shutdown at red lights and stop signs, cylinder deactivation, direct injection, and turbocharging. The report "demonstrates that the automakers are thumbing their collective noses at the Obama administration's mileage and emissions rules," says Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign. From 2012 to 2013, mileage increased a rather better 0.5 percent.

Carmakers, said Becker, "should be embarrassed to put in such an appalling, flat-line performance... After U.S. taxpayers delivered an \$85 billion bailout to GM and Chrysler, the auto industry is delivering a lemon."



Chevrolet's ZL1 Camaro makes 580 horsepower. Sure, at 12 mpg around town and 18 on the highway, it's more fuel efficient than the Super Sports and GTOs of yore. But still. (Chevrolet photo)

So what's going on, then? At the same time automakers are delivering world-class hybrid, plug-in hybrid and battery-powered electric cars such as the Ford C-MAX Energi to the Chevy Spark EV, they're also getting heavily into gas-guzzling muscle cars. As [Dan Neil reported in the Wall Street Journal](#):

Do you like acceleration, Johnny? Dodge will sell you a Challenger SRT Hellcat with 707 hp and an eight-speed transmission, a car that will lay down 11-second quarter-mile passes until they turn the track's floodlights off. A roaring Mopar fever dream. Chevrolet purveys a 580-hp Camaro ZL1 with Recaro seats, six-speed manual and a clutch, offering a top speed of 184 mph. Some exotic European brands are selling "megawatt" cars, with engine outputs of more than 1,341 hp.

Welcome to a new era of testosterone poisoning. [Ward's reports](#) that the 800-horsepower production car is in sight. Apparently, seven hundred horsepower just isn't enough. Sure, the new muscle cars are more efficient than the Challengers, GTOs and Super Sports of time gone by—some even have four-cylinder engines. The Ford Mustang EcoBoost is just as fast as the Boss 351, but achieves 25 mpg combined, a minor miracle. The Challenger Hellcat manages 22 mpg on the highway, but a miserable 13 MPG around town. And it's not just muscle cars that are dragging down the country's fuel efficiency. The Trends Report also reveals a two percent increase in U.S. truck sales for 2014. And according to Becker, "If you trade an efficient car for

an efficient truck, you take a big step backwards in fuel economy." Let's see what happens when [Ford introduces its aluminum-bodied 2015 F-150](#)--that should be a big gain for the automaker.



Ford is going for a green image with the 2015 F-150. But don't expect 40 mpg. (Ford photo)

The Big Three, and the auto industry in general, aren't going to reach the holy grail of 54.5 MPG by 2025, by getting into a horsepower race. They can't just do business as usual—enticing guys into showrooms with the lure of sheer power.

In my humble opinion, it's high time the auto companies started leading by example, and showing Americans that driving something fuel efficient can be cool. Very cool, in fact. Tesla's way ahead of the curve, here. Let me put it to you this way: which car would you rather be seen in, a Chevrolet Camaro ZL1, or a zero-emission Tesla Model S?

I rest my case.

<http://www.cartalk.com/blogs/jim-motavalli/fuel-economy-gains-slowng-down-blame-trucks-and-muscle-cars>