

Greenwire

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By Sean Reilly

The existing framework of vehicle fuel efficiency standards is "broken" and needs congressional review, Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) said yesterday after meeting with General Motors lobbyists.

In a news release, Inhofe touted a provision added to a recently enacted defense bill giving automakers the chance to earn credit toward meeting the corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards by making vehicles capable of running both on gasoline and natural gas. But Inhofe said the provision addressed only "a small portion of the inequality" in the program. While Inhofe also intends to address broader concerns with the CAFE program, "he is not yet announcing his next steps," spokeswoman Donelle Harder said in an email.

Accompanying yesterday's release was a photo of Inhofe with two GM officials at the Washington Auto Show. While the photo does not say who the men are, GM spokeswoman Sharon Basel this morning identified them as Mark Kemmer and Joseph Guzzo, both of whom are part of the company's Washington lobbying team, according to Senate public disclosure records.

The provision in the fiscal 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 3979) signed last month is based on a bill (S. 2065) introduced last February by Inhofe and then-Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) and referred to the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

The bill never got a hearing in that venue. But Levin, now retired, chaired the Senate Armed Services Committee last year while Inhofe was the ranking Republican, giving them considerable sway over the contents of the defense bill. In statements after the measure won final congressional approval, the two senators said it would foster the spread of vehicles able to run on relatively clean-burning natural gas.

Enactment "moves natural gas one step closer toward becoming a mainstream fuel for our everyday cars," Inhofe said.

But **Dan Becker**, director of the environmental advocacy group **Safe Climate Campaign**, yesterday called the new incentive an expansion of a "sham" program dating back to the late 1980s that gives car companies CAFE credit for making vehicles capable of running on both regular gas and E85 ethanol.

That original program was the brainchild of GM, Becker said in an interview. A 2002 Transportation Department report concluded that it had almost no impact on ethanol consumption, and "nothing has changed" since then, Becker said. He also noted that the Senate Commerce Committee, not the Environment and Public Works panel, has jurisdiction over the CAFE program.

The most recent CAFE standards require automakers to achieve an average fuel economy of 54.5 mpg by model year 2025. While it's hard to say how much of an impact the new incentive will have, GM's Basel said, she expressed appreciation for Inhofe's "leadership" and called the program important both "in terms of product development and satisfying the demand in the marketplace."