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2012 autos beat environmental standards, EPA reports

In terms of fuel economy and greenhouse gas emissions, the vehicles are 'even cleaner than the standard required,' an EPA official says.

By Neela Banerjee

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WASHINGTON — Cars and light-duty trucks for the 2012 model year exceeded new federal standards for fuel economy and greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The 2012 fleet averages 23.6 miles per gallon, up from 22.4 for the previous model year — one of the greatest improvements in fuel economy in 30 years, according to a report released Friday.

And the cars and trucks pump out an average of 286 grams of carbon dioxide per mile, nine grams less than the EPA standard.

The standards, which cover model years 2012 through 2016, are the first phase of the Obama administration's two-part plan that aims to nearly double the fuel economy of the nation's fleet to 54.5 mpg by 2025.

"The report is the first official glimpse of how auto companies are doing it and rising to meet the challenge," EPA Deputy Administrator Bob Perciasepe said. Their vehicles are "even cleaner than the standard required. The standards are helping to reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions and saving consumers money."

Most companies, however, did not actually cut tailpipe emissions for many vehicles, especially sport utility vehicles and trucks. Instead, they used credits allowed by the EPA for engineering changes to offset greenhouse gas emissions.

Dan Becker, director of Safe Climate Campaign, a Washington advocacy group, noted that many of the reported reductions are only on paper. All but one company — Honda Motor Co. — would have failed to comply with EPA's new greenhouse gas standards without the credits, said Becker, a former environmental advisor to President Clinton.

The EPA itself notes in the report that without the credits, the fleetwide average carbon dioxide emissions for 2012 vehicles was 296 grams per mile, one gram above the standard. Still, even without the credits, 2012 vehicles emitted, on average, less carbon dioxide than 2011 vehicles.

Automakers get credits for building flex-fuel vehicles, especially within their truck and SUV fleets, that can run on conventional gasoline and a corn-based ethanol fuel called E85.

They also get credits for improving their vehicle air conditioning systems to use less mechanical energy provided by gasoline and to reduce leakage of hydrofluorocarbon refrigerants, which are potent greenhouse gases.

Manufacturers whose vehicles pollute more can buy credits to offset their carbon dioxide emissions.

The credit system gives the industry flexibility to improve fuel economy and greenhouse gas reductions, the EPA report said, "allowing EPA to set a standard that is more stringent than could be achieved."

Becker contended that the credits were a give-away to the auto industry.

The vast majority of flex-fuel vehicles, which get relatively low gas mileage, still burn gasoline. Less than 2% of the country's 160,000 gas stations sell E85. The improvements to air conditioning systems have reduced greenhouse gas emissions, but automakers were on track to make those changes anyway, Becker said.

"Flexibility means you can cheat and it's OK," he said.

Detroit's Big Three automakers and Toyota Motor Corp. benefited considerably from the application of the credits against the actual emissions of their 2012 fleets.

For instance, General Motors Co.'s truck fleet had to meet a standard of 369 grams of carbon dioxide per mile. Without the credits, its trucks averaged 397 grams. With them, GM's truck fleet averaged 366 grams.

Altogether, the credits offset 38 million tons of carbon dioxide that 2012 vehicles pumped into the atmosphere because they lacked the technology to cut greenhouse gas emissions at the tailpipe.

But Luke Tonachel, vehicles analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council, welcomed the fact that vehicle greenhouse gas emissions declined even without counting the credits.

"The flex-fuel vehicle credits will be phased out by 2019," Tonachel said. "The companies know that, and while they have relied on them heavily here, they can't be in their long-term plans."

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