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## Fuel Efficiency Standards Live On After 1973 Oil Embargo

This is the 40th anniversary of the Arab Oil Embargo, which triggered a seven-year energy crisis. The results of the energy crisis are still with us — both in the political fault-lines in Washington and in the cars that are on our roads.

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RENEE MONTAGNE, HOST:

This year is the 40th anniversary of the OPEC oil embargo - an event that has shaped our nation's politics and the cars we drive ever since. In 1973, the Arab world decided to cut oil exports to punish nations that supported Israel during its war with Egypt and Syria. While the embargo only lasted several months, it triggered an energy crisis that lasted for years. NPR's Richard Harris reports on the ways we are still feel those effects today.

RICHARD HARRIS, BYLINE: Forty years ago, the nation was dealing with high inflation, the Watergate crisis, and on top of that a growing energy problem. Domestic oil production had peaked in 1970, and the nation was becoming more dependent on imported oil. Then in October of 1973 came the Arab-Israeli war.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "NIGHTLY NEWS")

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: This is NBC "Nightly News," Wednesday, October 17th. Reported by John Chancellor.

JOHN CHANCELLOR: The oil producing countries of the Arab world decided to use their oil as a political weapon. They will reduce oil production by five percent a month until the Israelis withdraw from occupied territories.

HARRIS: President Nixon put it bluntly.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED SPEECH)

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON: We are heading toward the most acute shortages of energy since World War II.

MEG JACOBS: So the signs were all evident of a crisis in the making and yet Americans were very much taken by surprise.

HARRIS: Meg Jacobs is a history professor at MIT, teaching at Princeton at the moment as she finishes a book on the energy crisis.

JACOBS: The question really was what to do in the wake of the embargo, where you had a roughly 10 percent cut in American supply.

HARRIS: The price climbed sharply, but even worse were the shortages. Lines at gas stations sometimes stretched for miles - that is, when they had gas to sell.

JACOBS: What you see happening in response to the Arab embargo is the imposition of even stricter government regulations, both on price and allocation.

HARRIS: Nixon created an energy czar who exerted great control over the supply and price of oil. Congress also imposed a national speed limit of 55 miles per hour, and year-round daylight savings time to reduce energy use. All that together triggered a sharp and sustained debate over the appropriate role of government regulation.

President Jimmy Carter maintained many of the regulations that President Nixon's Republican administration had put in place.

JACOBS: When Ronald Reagan runs in 1980, he is able to say here's an example where the government is a problem rather than the solution.

HARRIS: Jacobs says the energy crisis laid the groundwork for the fundamental partisan divide that persists in Washington today. Energy shortages came to an end during Reagan's time in office, due primarily to a global recession that reduced demand.

The 55-mile-per hour law was eventually abandoned, along with price controls on gas. But one law enacted during the early days of the energy crisis is still going strong. Dan Becker, who heads the Safe Climate Campaign, points to fuel-efficiency standards.

DAN BECKER: Ironically, it was the Ford Foundation that empanelled a group of experts to try to figure out how do we avoid future oil shocks. And they came back with a recommendation that Ford Motor Company hated, saying let's adopt mile per gallon standards that require auto companies to put better technology on their vehicles.

HARRIS: As a result, fuel efficiency climbed from 13.5 miles per gallon to 27 miles per gallon. Hybrids and compacts from Japan swirl around us as we sit in a Washington DC park - tangible reminders that those regulations have shaped our automotive fleet ever since.

BECKER: The fact that we use two million barrels a day less oil than we did a few years ago is indirectly due to the OPEC oil embargo.

HARRIS: And following a 2007 update to that law, fuel efficiency in cars is slated to double again by the year 2025. Chances are in that year the nation will still be debating the appropriate role of government regulation. But at least will be burning a lot less fuel. Richard Harris, NPR News.

MONTAGNE: This is NPR News.

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