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E.P.A. Develops Grading System for New Car Stickers

By **Jim Motavalli** August 30, 2010 3:54 pm

The Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration on Monday introduced proposed new window stickers that would appear on new vehicles beginning in the 2012 model year.

One of the proposed stickers, mandated by the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, which required the agencies to rate vehicles on fuel economy, greenhouse gases and smog-forming pollutants, would assign vehicles a letter grade, a proposal that was quickly criticized by automakers.

Indeed, the E.P.A. calculated in one situation that if the new sticker were applied now, many 2010 vehicles would get fairly low grades, including a B- for 306 small cars. Only eight current S.U.V.'s would attain a grade of B+ (68 get a C) and the highest grade for a current van would be C+.

Gina McCarthy, E.P.A. assistant administrator for air and radiation, said on a conference call that the grading system compared cars against a full range of models, "not just S.U.V.'s against S.U.V.'s." She said the grade range would be A+ to D. "Because all cars must meet our tough emission standards, there are no F's," the E.P.A. said. The sticker also informs consumers as to their fuel costs over five years as compared with "the average vehicle."

The highest grade, A+, with fuel economy rated as equivalent to 117 miles per gallon and up, would be for "zero emission" electric cars. Plug-in hybrid electric cars (59 to 116 m.p.g. equivalent) would get an A, and some conventional hybrids, like the Toyota Prius and Ford Fusion, would get an A-. Other hybrids, like the Nissan Altima, Ford Escape and Toyota Camry, would receive a B+.

“The old labels are just not good enough anymore,” said David Strickland, the N.H.T.S.A. administrator. He added that the new label included a code that, when read by a smartphone, will deliver further information to the consumer.

A second proposed window sticker contains the same basic information as the first, but is more of an evolution of the current design, without a letter grade.

Automakers weighed in quickly against the proposed letter grading. Dave McCurdy, president and chief executive of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a trade group representing 11 carmakers, said the rating system “falls short because it is imbued with school-yard memories of passing and failing.”

In an e-mail to reporters, Gloria Bergquist, an Alliance vice president, wrote, “Your spokesperson tried to give the proposal a D, but was told not to do so by her boss.” Rating it somewhat higher was Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety. “Overall it’s a B,” he said in an e-mail.

Mr. Becker said he appreciated that the grading system would compare all cars against one another. But he also questioned whether battery cars were zero emission vehicles. He said that the sticker for electric cars should also take note of what are called upstream emissions, which are pollutants emitted by power plants when they produce the electricity that charges the cars. Such a system would probably require dividing the United States into separate regions because some parts of the country have higher concentrations of coal-burning plants and thus a greater upstream burden.

During the news conference, Ms. McCarthy said such emissions would be addressed at an E.P.A. Web site.

There will be a 60-day comment period, which begins when the proposed rule-making is published in the Federal Register, according to Cathy Milbourn, an E.P.A. spokeswoman. The filing process could take 10 days, she said.

More information is at www.epa.gov/fueleconomy.