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Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line

Michigan Lawmakers Call Auto Mileage Proposals ‘Overly Aggressive’

By John M. Broder July 22, 2011 12:59 pm

Michigan’s congressional delegation has warned in a letter to the White House that new automobile fuel economy and emissions standards being drafted by the Obama administration are “not reasonably feasible” given the state of current technology and consumer buying habits.

Weighing in as negotiations between federal and state officials and the major automakers are nearing a decisive point, Michigan’s two senators and 14 of its 15 House members said that the White House’s goal of a 56.2-mile-per-gallon fleet average by 2025 would drive up new vehicle costs by thousands of dollars and cost hundreds of thousands of auto workers their jobs.

The lawmakers said the White House program, which has not been officially announced and is likely to change somewhat, was “overly aggressive” and would deny consumers the right to buy medium- and heavy-duty pickup trucks. They also expressed concern that the proposed new regulations would set rules 14 years in the future, while previous mileage rules have had only a five-year life span.

They say that it is impossible to predict the shape of the vehicle market so far in advance and that the new rules should be limited to 2017-2021. Regulations for the model years 2012-2016 are already in place, setting an overall fleet average of 35.5 miles per gallon.

The letter reflects the concerns of the domestic automakers, which say they are at a disadvantage compared with Asian and European manufacturers, which do not depend as much on sales of trucks, crossovers and minivans and which can more

easily meet the aggressive government targets. A coalition of automakers is planning a series of radio advertisements in states with significant auto industry employment criticizing the administration's proposed mileage target.

Letter to the President on Fuel Economy

The letter, signed by Michigan Republicans and Democrats, noted that the state's unemployment rate is 10.5 percent. It urged the administration to slow down and consider the views of the Detroit car companies and the United Automobile Workers before proposing a challenging new rule setting a 56.2 m.p.g. standard.

“Such a proposal would push beyond the limits of reasonably feasible technology development and would have significant negative ramifications for U.S. jobs and competitiveness,” it stated. “Technology and economics must reasonably support the targets and goals for fuel economy improvement and greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and we are concerned that the administration's current approach is not leading in that direction.”

A White House spokesman, Clark Stevens, said that the administration shared the Michigan delegation's interest in the recovery of the domestic auto industry and that ambitious new mileage targets would aid, not hinder, the car companies.

“We continue to have constructive engagement with automakers, labor, and other stakeholders, and will continue to consider issues and concerns raised by the delegation and others as we work towards a national program for model years 2017-2025 that will reduce dependence on oil and save families money at the pump while protecting consumer choice, creating jobs, and ensuring that the cars and trucks of the future are built in America,” he said in an e-mailed statement.

The only member of the Michigan delegation not to sign the letter was Representative John Conyers Jr., a Democrat. His office, in a statement, said Mr. Conyers believed that higher fuel efficiency standards would be good for the industry and good for the country.

“Mr. Conyers is standing up for higher fuel economy standards which will create jobs, not eliminate them,” the statement said. “Mr. Conyers believes that a strict emissions standard will significantly reduce global warming, the thirst for oil

and high gas pump costs. The higher standards set forth as a goal by the president could have the effect of reducing our appetite for oil, create jobs and significantly decrease billions of dollars to OPEC and others.”

The United Automobile Workers expressed support this week for strong and feasible fuel efficiency standards but did not specify what it meant by the terms. The U.A.W. president, Bob King, along with officials of the steelworkers’ union and the Sierra Club, said new mileage standards could save consumers money at the gas pumps, create domestic jobs and reduce the emissions that cause global warming. But the groups did not endorse a specific mileage figure.

Representative Fred Upton, a Michigan Republican and chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said federal agencies and the White House had embarked on a dangerous path.

“As these negotiations unfold, the Michigan delegation is not going to stand by and watch the regulators in Washington hand down a set of standards that will destroy jobs, eliminate vehicle options for families and put America at a competitive disadvantage,” Mr. Upton said Friday in a statement. “One of the most troubling aspects of these negotiations is the effort to set a standard through 2025, which is more than a decade and several generations of technology into the future. American manufacturers, autoworkers, and the car-buying public will be the ones who pay the price.”

Daniel Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign and a longtime environmental advocate and critic of the car companies, was critical of the lawmakers who have helped the automakers stave off previous efforts to improve vehicle efficiency.

“Those wonderful folks who fought off attempts to make Detroit innovate are back urging President Obama to join their happy Luddite band,” said Mr. Becker. “It is telling that their letter ignores the millions of barrels of oil, billions of tons of carbon dioxide and billions of dollars tough standards would save.”