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Why Hundreds of Thousands of Recalled VW Cars May Not Be Repaired

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Volkswagen is in huge trouble. Last month, [news surfaced](#) that the German car manufacturer has been selling diesel-fueled cars in the U.S. with illegal software designed to trick environmental inspectors. These cars, while marketed as environmentally friendly, actually emit up to 40 times more nitrogen oxides than what is permitted under the Clean Air Act. Volkswagen has since issued [a recall](#) for the nearly half a million diesel cars in the U.S., and [millions more](#) in Europe.

But here's another problem. Many American car owners are ambivalent about taking their recalled Volkswagen vehicles in for repair. As Christopher Jensen reported for [The New York Times](#), many question whether fixing their cars would be worth it if they have to then deal with decreased fuel performance.

One 2013 Jetta TDI owner quoted in the story said that if repairing his car would decrease his gas mileage by 25 percent, or if the repair somehow degrades performance “to the point where the car has a lot less torque and pickup”—then he might consider not fixing it at all.

And indeed, right now he wouldn't have to. Although recalled cars present clear public health risks, no laws currently exist that would require owners to actually fix their vehicles. (Note: the manufacturer, not the owner, would shoulder the cost of the auto repair.)

Dan Becker, the director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety, told Jensen that Volkswagen should figure out how to “incentivize” drivers to fix their cars. “Volkswagen made this disaster; it is its responsibility to fix it,” he said. This has precedent: General Motors offered car owners [a \\$25 gift card](#) last year if they brought in their recalled vehicles to be fixed. Still, many never did.

Volkswagen should certainly be required to compensate owners for their deception, but the government should also recognize that there are steps it can take to ensure that these recalled vehicles do get fixed.

The environmental risks posed by these diesel vehicles seem too great to allow their repair to rest upon an individual's conscience or cost-benefit analysis. Volkswagen should certainly be required to compensate owners for their deception, but the government should also recognize that there are steps it can take to ensure that these recalled vehicles do get fixed.

In the fall 2014 issue of *The American Prospect* I published a story, "[Recalled But Not Repaired](#)" which looked at why so few vehicle owners actually take their recalled cars in for repair. In 2011, the Government Accountability Office found the annual recall compliance rate in the United States averages 65 percent—meaning that millions of unsafe cars are never fixed. In Germany, by contrast, the recall compliance rate is 100 percent. The difference is that the German government mandates that vehicle owners repair their unsafe cars, and officials refuse to renew vehicle registrations for owners who don't.

As I argued last year, we could do this in the United States, too. We could make car registration renewal contingent on auto recall completion. This would be a relatively easy policy to administer, since DMVs can check online for recalls when owners come in to renew their registration.

Some states, like California and New Jersey, already employ a similar system for energy emissions standards. The sad irony, of course, is that we now know Volkswagen had been using secret software to manipulate those energy emissions tests all along.

A spokesperson for the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission was quoted in the *Times* story saying that it would be "premature and speculative" to consider applying a similar system to the Volkswagen recalls.

I'm not convinced she's right, but even if she is, it's important that we begin talking more seriously about mandating recalled cars to be repaired. There would be details to consider, certainly. Loaner vehicles may have to be supplied to those who don't want to go temporarily without a car, and maybe some vehicle technicians would have to travel out to car owners who can't get to a dealership. Yet all those details could be sorted out.

Ultimately, mandating that car owners repair their vehicles makes far more sense than simply trying to incentivize people to fix them through things like gift cards. The stakes are too high. And with more than 64 million recalled-but-not-repaired vehicles on the road today, it's time we start pushing for more serious solutions.

<http://prospect.org/article/why-hundreds-thousands-recalled-vw-cars-may-not-be-repaired>