

October 16, 2013, 2:33 pm

On E.U. Carbon Emissions Rule, First the Announcement, Then the Uproar

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On Monday, the European Union's environmental ministers agreed to delay a plan to hold cars to tough new carbon emissions limits by 2020. On Tuesday they faced the music.

Environmental groups expressed outrage that a deal, reached last summer and expected to be ratified on Monday, had instead been delayed, largely by Germany, a move that was supported by England. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's government is no longer supportive of the agreement, and a number of green groups said she was under heavy pressure from some German automakers worried that they could not meet the 2020 target — an automotive fleet average of 95 grams of carbon dioxide per kilometer.

A German proposal would delay full implementation of the standard until 2024, but it would need approval from multiple European bodies. According to the European Commission, the 2020 target represents a 40 percent reduction from the fleet average in 2007.

The E.U. rule is, obviously, more of a challenge for automakers that produce larger cars.

“Two German manufacturers, BMW and Daimler, have decided they will miss this target and task the German government with weakening and delaying it instead,” Franziska Achterberg, European Union transport policy director for Greenpeace, said in an e-mail. “The rest of the industry, including car manufacturers such as Germany's Volkswagen, Ford and Toyota, and Europe's automotive suppliers, have broadly accepted the law.”

Jos Dings, director of Brussels-based Transport and Environment, said in a telephone interview, “This is an almost unimaginable display of naked power politics from Germany. A fair deal was struck, and Germany was a part of it.” Mr. Dings said that the German proposal to delay the full rule was very unlikely to be approved.

The reaction from the American environmental advocacy camp was also one of shock and displeasure.

“It's dreadful that the European Union caved in to German automaker pressure to delay a sound environmental and oil-saving protection standard,” Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign, said in a telephone interview. “They say that German engineering is the best in the world, and if it's half as good as they say it is they can meet these standards. This is auto mechanics, not rocket science.”

“BMW does not have a comment on this issue,” said Dave Buchko, a spokesman for the company, in an e-mail. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents Mercedes-Benz USA and the BMW Group, also declined to comment.

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