

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/business/energy-environment/fuel-economy-hits-six-year-high.html?_r=0

September 10, 2013

Vehicle Fuel Efficiency Reaches a High, Nearing Goal for 2016

By [BILL VLASIC](#) and JACLYN TROP

DETROIT — Automakers are making slow but steady progress improving fuel efficiency, as the industry hit a high for the average miles per gallon of new vehicles sold in August in the United States.

[A study](#) released by the University of Michigan on Tuesday said that the average fuel economy on the window stickers of cars and trucks sold last month was 24.9 miles per gallon.

That was nearly five miles per gallon better than the 20.1 m.p.g. recorded in October 2007, when the university's Transportation Research Institute began tracking the data.

The improvements reflect broad changes across the industry in the size, weight and engines in new models, as well as an increase in the number of hybrid and electric vehicles on the market.

“Consumers are interested in fuel-efficient vehicles and automakers can make them,” said Don Anair, a green-car expert with the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The car companies are under pressure to increase fuel efficiency to meet strict federal standards for corporate average fuel economy, or CAFE.

But the latest data indicates that automakers are apparently on track to at least meet interim goals agreed to last year in negotiations with the Obama administration.

The CAFE performance of a vehicle is several miles per gallon better than the fuel economy numbers on window stickers of new vehicles in the showroom.

Last month, the university's research showed that for CAFE purposes, new vehicles achieved 30.1 miles per gallon, not including credits and adjustments that manufacturers are allowed under the federal rules.

Under the new government standards, automakers have agreed to a fleetwide CAFE mandate of 35.5 miles per gallon by 2016, and 54.5 m.p.g. by 2025.

Mr. Anair said that 35.5 miles per gallon under the CAFE formula was equivalent to about 27 m.p.g. listed on a window sticker. That would make the 2016 goal achievable at the current rate of improvement. "It's a good sign," he said. "We're on track."

The overall gains in fuel economy since 2007 have accelerated since the American automakers have recovered from the recession.

General Motors and Chrysler both went bankrupt four years ago and needed government bailouts to stay in business. Since then, they have brought out some of their most fuel-efficient models, with G.M. introducing a series of small cars that achieved markedly better gas mileage than its older vehicles.

Ford Motor Company, which was the only Detroit car company to avoid bankruptcy, has also made rapid improvement in the fuel economy of its cars and pickup trucks.

And Toyota, the largest Japanese manufacturer, has continued to expand its lineup of Prius and other hybrid vehicles, which run alternately on gasoline and battery power and are among the most fuel-efficient on the road.

One of the University of Michigan researchers, Michael Sivak, said the mileage improvements since 2007 reflected sustained gains across the industry.

"The 4.8 m.p.g. improvement in the source of the past six years is significant both by itself and in comparison to the change in vehicle fuel economy over the past 90 years," he said.

Some environmental groups contend that the industry can do more than it has, and that achieving the CAFE goals might be a stretch at the current rate of improvement.

"The key issue is whether the industry is doing what it needs to do to achieve the standards," said Daniel Becker, an official with the Safe Climate Campaign environmental organization.

Mr. Becker said the current numbers might be overstated in actual driving conditions, particularly because new high-tech engines do not always achieve the mileage listed on stickers.

"I think the numbers are too high," he said. "Turbocharged cars in particular can be very sensitive to the way an individual drives."

Still, the gradual improvements in the fuel economy of one-time gas guzzlers like pickup trucks and large sport utility vehicles help increase the overall industry average.

"For a long time there's been this notion that a truck is a big brute of a thing and that if it's fuel-efficient, it can't do the job," said Philip G. Gott, an analyst at the research firm IHS Automotive. "The market is finally beginning to realize that's not the case."

Auto companies are also bringing out new versions of hybrids, plug-in hybrids that run primarily on battery power, and purely electric models.

The trend is extending now into luxury models, with the German automaker BMW planning a new electric car and G.M.'s Cadillac division preparing to introduce its first plug-in.

While the short-term CAFE mandate in 2016 appears achievable, analysts are divided on whether the industry has enough promising new technologies to hit the 2025 target of 54.5 miles per gallon.

“There’s a lot of work left to do,” said Mr. Gott. He said that a federal tax on gasoline could be one option to spur sales of some fuel-efficient models that have been lagging in the marketplace.

“We have national goals, and we need to meet them,” he said. “The automakers are getting to the point where they can’t do it alone.”

Auto research firms like Edmunds.com and Kelley Blue Book say that good fuel economy is among the highest priorities for consumers looking to buy a new vehicle, regardless of whether it is a pickup or a hybrid.

And with the nation’s fleet of cars and trucks aging rapidly, more people are replacing older models with new vehicles that perform substantially better.