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A Battle Royal Over Fuel Economy Standards: Automakers vs. Greens

By [Jim Motavalli](#) (/user/jim-motavalli) · July 01, 2011

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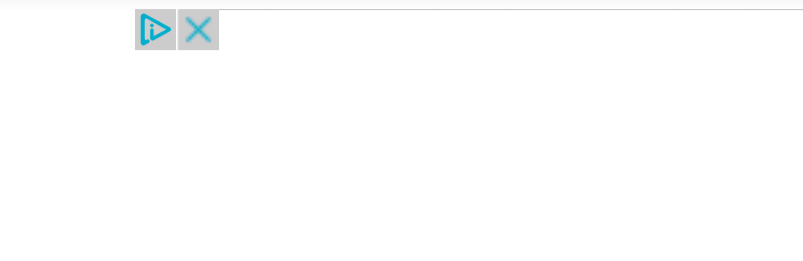


Automakers are producing the green cars, like this very fuel-efficient Toyota Prius C, but they're balking at tough federal standards. (Jim Motavalli photo)

It's really interesting to watch the maneuvering after the [Obama Administration's proposed 56.2 mpg federal fuel economy standard](#) (<http://www.plugincars.com/what-would-562-mpg-cafe-standard-mean-plug-ins-107344.html>) for 2025 was leaked from a closed-door meeting with automakers at the White House last week. It's an ambitious number, and it will either a) destroy Detroit and devastate auto industry employment; or b) create 700,000 jobs, 60,000 of them in auto factories.

There are even dueling Republican interest groups. Last week, [a group of former GOP office holders](#) (<http://www.autoobserver.com/2011/06/something-missing-in-plea-for-better-fuel-economy.html>) sent a letter calling for "strong, forward-looking standards for new vehicle fuel efficiency and emissions" that will drive reductions in oil consumption and carbon pollution that fuels climate change." But it was immediately followed by another letter from a group of 15 current governors (only one a Democrat) that cautioned against making the standards too aggressive.

There's intense pressure being brought to bear here, especially from automakers that don't much like the idea of 56.2 mpg. According to *Automotive News*, "Automakers say the Obama administration appears not to be wedded to the 56.2-mpg target for 2025 it floated last week and may be open to other refinements." The "refinements" are loopholes, including a slow phase-in and a midterm review (which could kill the program entirely) that the greens are working furiously to close.



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One key green player is Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety, who says, "The auto companies are trying to pressure the White House to weaken the rule." A green delegation met with the White House this week and they seem confident that the 56.2 mpg standard will hold. They would actually prefer 62 mpg by 2025, which would mean a six percent per year improvement. According to Becker, "We reminded the administration that it promised a million plug-in vehicles by 2015, and without a six percent per year standard that won't happen."

Roland Hwang, the clean vehicles campaigner at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in an email that the greens' "opening gambit" was 62 mpg, "and the automakers countered with 42 to 47. The agencies [the EPA and NHTSA] have moved to 56.2 mpg, but the automakers have not." NRDC doesn't have a "line in the sand" on the final number, but like Becker it's very concerned about loopholes.

The environmental groups are actually in a fairly strong position, because of California. The big auto state joined the federal emissions program for 2012-2016 because it's as strong as the state's separate program. But the state, whose emissions rules are followed by 12 other states and the District of Columbia, could break away and revive its own, stricter program. That's the worst nightmare for automakers, far worse than a federal 56.2 standard with no loopholes. The clean car advocates were to have met with Governor Jerry Brown to air their views on the state's role, but that meeting was postponed because of the ongoing budget mess.

The 700,000 jobs claim is contained in an as-yet unreleased report from [CERES](http://www.ceres.org/html), a coalition of investors and green groups that works on economic sustainability issues. It says that a six percent yearly fuel economy improvement (62 mpg by 2025) would "generate a net gain of nearly 700,000 full-time jobs nationwide by 2030." The group also says six percent will generate \$125 billion in fuel savings by 2030 as opposed to a business-as-usual scenario.

Countering this, the Auto Alliance, representing 12 carmakers, sees a 14 percent sales drop by 2025 if 62 mpg becomes law, and huge job loss.

The public has generally backed high fuel economy standards in polls, so Obama may not have much to lose by standing firm at 56.2 mpg. But the lobbying is going to be hot and heavy for quite a while.

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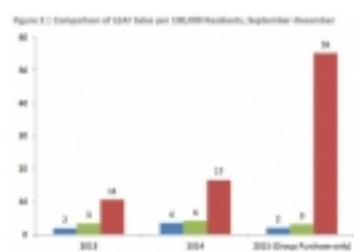
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[Charles](http://www.modernferrotype.com) (not verified) · 4 years ago

Remember that 56.2 CAFE MPG is really just about 40 EPA sticker MPG. 62 CAFE MPG

would be about 44 EPA sticker MPG. The 56.2 MPG fleet average is not really all that high.



[darelidd](/user/darelidd) (/user/darelidd) · 4 years ago

I have trouble just getting past the title of the article. Why don't we call it "Browns vs Greens?" Or how about "Automakers vs People who care about something other than next month's profits?"

Sorry.. I'm no help here. I just have trouble hearing people (or anything) labeled as "green" just because they're pushing for something that benefits everybody in the long run. Shouldn't that stance just be the standard, and everybody else is brown?



[dutchinchicago](/user/dutchinchicago) (/user/dutchinchicago) · 4 years ago

I am with you darelidd.



[EVNow](/user/evnow) (/user/evnow) · 4 years ago

I don't know - 2025 looks far away. So many presidents and speakers in between now and then.

More importantly, if Peak Oil has any truth in it, CAFE standards won't be driving the efficiency by then. Oil availability will.



[Yegor](/user/yegor) (/user/yegor) · 4 years ago

What is so unachievable about EPA 44 mpg (CAFE 62 mpg)?

Toyota Prius today gets EPA 50 mpg.
Nissan Leaf today gets EPA 99 mpg.

Auto Manufactures will need just a few percent of electric cars in their mix to be able to meet EPA 44 mpg (CAFE 62 mpg) standard. So may be cars would couple of thousands more expansive - people will quickly return it by paying less for fuel.

EPA 40 mpg (CAFE 56,2 mpg) is even easier target that could be achieved without any electric cars.



[jim1961](#) (not verified) · 4 years ago

Climate change is just the tip of the iceberg (pun not intended). Some might call me an alarmist but I believe we need to make some serious changes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Higher CAFE standards alone are not going to be effective. We need a carbon tax. The CEOs of Ford and GM have both advocated a \$1 per gallon tax on gasoline and both will probably fight to weaken CAFE standards. That may seem contradictory to some people and common sense to others. To those of you who think it's contradictory please stop reading this now. For those of you who think it's common sense, please read the following article. <http://www.grist.org/article/2010-12-15-if-efficiency-hasnt-cut-energy-u...>
(<http://www.grist.org/article/2010-12-15-if-efficiency-hasnt-cut-energy-use-then-what>)



[Travisty](/user/travisty) (/user/travisty) · 4 years ago

@Jim1961

The game changer that needs to be looked at is Solar Road Ways

TED Video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvWTAqUvsvA> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvWTAqUvsvA>)

Simply the best idea for energy independence that I've heard of. The idea is basically make roads out of plates with solar panels underneath, LEDs to light the road - paint the yellow / white lines while allowing the road to be dynamic, and removes our need for petrol concrete with the use of rough steel-strong glass.

I wish the politicians in DC would get their heads out of their butts and take a look around and solve the real problems we're facing - rising oil costs and every growing energy demand. Investing heavily in replacing all roadways that'll make energy basically free will make more jobs than any idea in Washington.



[darelidd](/user/darelidd) (</user/darelidd>) · 4 years ago

I honestly see far more problems than solutions with "solar roadways." We don't solve anything with better roads. We solve things by getting people OFF the roads, and not building more.



[Right Steps \(not verified\)](#) · 4 years ago

Car company executives may balk at increasing CAFE standards but that's what they're always going to do. It's not in THEIR best interests being majority stock holders if it sells LESS cars because they're so efficient. I take an argument from Plug in America's book "Plug-in Hybrids" by Shelly Boshert:

Automakers said they couldn't add seat belts to cars in the 70's...they did. Automakers said they couldn't add airbags...they did. When they said they couldn't produce electric cars...they did. I'm a mechanical engineer and I've looked at the cost of increasing fuel efficiency and it's actually quite affordable. Cars generally only get 25% efficiency anyways.



[Travisty](/user/travisty) (</user/travisty>) · 4 years ago

@darelidd

I'd agree with you for urban areas or if the US was the size of Texas.

Building a mass-transit system capable of transporting most people where they need to go is financially impossible - see China's rail expansion financial disaster for example.

Solar Roadways is the best idea; it'll even simplify going EV. It would make quick charging stations along the highways simple and much less expensive. Major power lines would run right along the new roadway so there's little difficulty connecting to the grid - somewhat oversimplified but it's an example.

Also for those in snowy climates, since the solar road tiles can be heated there is no longer dangers of ice build up and there will be less of a need for snow plows - only for the 1ft/hour blizzards.

While it would be great to get people using mass transit, there's really no way to finance it. The great thing about the solar roadways is as roads get repaved they're replaced by solar roads. As more solar roads are in place less coal is burned, less oil is used, more power becomes localized and cheaper.



[Michael](/user/michael) (</user/michael>) · 4 years ago

Alternate viewpoint: These environmental groups don't care about the economy or people's jobs. Their bottom line is bringing in donation and government grant revenue, and pulling in six figure plus salaries. They pull a number out of their...er...out of the air, and demand it just to make headlines and publicity. There is no rationale.

2025??? You've got to be kidding me. Do people actually take this stuff seriously? Who knows what the technological landscape will be by then. This is nothing more than a publicity stunt for politicians (most of whom will be out of office by then) and their donors.

BTW, I demand that all petroleum and electric cars be banned, and the only propulsion system be pedal power by the year 2100!

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