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## **Safety of Heavier Cars May Be Used to Lower U.S. Fuel Efficiency**

**By: Ryan Beene and John Lippert**

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The Trump administration is said to be reviewing the safety advantages of heavier cars -- a point of controversy among researchers -- as it considers lowering future automotive fuel economy targets by as much as 23 percent.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is evaluating the implications of weaker targets as the Trump administration and California regulators discuss the fate of ambitious standards charted under President Barack Obama, according to documents obtained by Bloomberg News.

One advantage of the change the agency cites in the documents would be a potential drop in highway deaths, which have been stubbornly rising in recent years.

For example, one scenario in the draft NHTSA analysis would permit an average fleetwide fuel economy standard of 35.7 miles per gallon by 2026, down from a 46.6 miles per gallon under the Obama-era target. Traffic fatalities would be reduced by an average of nearly 1,200 per year from 2036 through 2045, according to the analysis.

NHTSA officials are considering highlighting those safety implications when the agency releases a range of proposed future fuel economy standards, according to a person familiar with the matter. A spokeswoman for NHTSA didn’t respond to a request for comment on the documents.

NHTSA Acting Administrator Heidi King said in January that the agency would issue a notice of proposed rulemaking on March 30. The EPA plans to decide by April 1 whether its separate tailpipe emissions standards for cars and light trucks for model years 2022 through 2025 should be revised.

The documents show the factors that NHTSA officials are considering as they prepare to put fuel economy rules in place at least for model years 2022 to 2025. They also provide a glimpse into the talks between NHTSA, the Environmental Protection Agency and California regulators as they decide the fate of one of the Obama administration’s signature environmental policies.

NHTSA first enacted its Corporate Average Fuel Economy standard in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab oil embargo. In 2009, they were linked with tailpipe greenhouse gas emissions standards set by the EPA and the California Air Resources Board under a deal brokered by the Obama administration.

Weakening the standards could set the Trump administration on a collision course with California environmental officials, who have vowed to defend their own efficiency standards.

On Saturday, the ARB said it hasn’t received a formal proposal from NHTSA and so couldn’t comment specifically. The state remains convinced that California is helping U.S. manufacturers remain competitive by prodding them to invest in electric cars and other fuel-saving technologies, according to Stanley Young, an ARB spokesman. The U.S. government would be taking an “unwise” step if it rolls back its requirements now, he said.

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Researchers have studied the relationship between vehicle mass and highway deaths for decades. All things being equal, larger and heavier vehicles provide drivers and passengers with better protection in a crash, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

A 2001 study by the National Academy of Sciences found that the downsizing of vehicles that occurred in the 1970's and 1980's -- whether caused by market forces or fuel economy standards -- may have contributed to 1,300 to 2,600 additional highway deaths in 1993.

The study recommended several changes to the efficiency regulations, including basing fuel economy on an attribute such as vehicle weight. That would mitigate an incentive for automakers to sell smaller, fuel-sipping cars to offset sales of gas-guzzling trucks.

That change was made in 2009, when NHTSA began tying fuel economy targets to a vehicle's "footprint," the area between a vehicle's four wheels.

"IIHS is supportive of the fuel economy standards as implemented," spokesman Russ Rader said. "The Obama-era changes to the rules, essentially using a sliding scale for fuel economy improvements by vehicle footprint, addressed safety concerns that IIHS raised in the past."

Automakers, meanwhile, have deployed new technologies while also shaving weight from cars and trucks. Lighter, stronger materials are increasingly found in vehicles large and small, like Ford Motor Co.'s decision to make the body of its F-150 pickup entirely out of aluminum. Automakers are also looking to deploy electronic stability control, automatic emergency braking and other active safety systems to prevent or mitigate crashes.

NHTSA's draft analysis estimates that reducing the 2026 target to 35.7 miles per gallon would cut the price of new vehicles in 2030 by nearly \$1,800 on average but lead to 77 billion gallons in additional fuel consumption compared to the the Obama-era standards. Other scenarios offer less aggressive cuts to future standards. The document doesn't specify a preferred scenario.

Another one being considered by NHTSA would require a 42.1 mile-per-gallon fleet average in 2026 and would lead to a projected 675 fewer highway deaths per year over a decade starting in 2036, according to the document. New vehicle costs in 2030 would be \$1,275 less on average some 49 billion gallons in additional fuel would be burned, the document shows.

Today, the federal rules are aligned with California's tailpipe standards as part of a deal struck by Obama regulators to raise the average fuel economy of new cars and light trucks to more than 50 miles per gallon by 2025. That translates to roughly 36 miles per gallon in real-world driving.

Even if NHTSA weakens its fuel economy rules, the Trump administration could choose to allow the EPA to continue strengthening its greenhouse gas emission limits so that they remain aligned with California's, said Robert Bienenfeld, assistant vice president for Honda Motor Co.'s U.S. environmental policy.

Such an agreement could even extend out to 2030, the time frame for which California is already preparing tougher rules, Bienenfeld said.

But to support such a plan, Honda would want some additional changes, he said. These include streamlining the rules to avoid added costs that don't help the environment, and periodic reviews to make sure they're having the desired impact. Honda would also support, he said, changing an Obama-era rule so that energy companies rather than automakers will be accountable for emissions that occur when they generate electricity for battery-powered cars.

The draft also indicates NHTSA may propose standards for as early as the 2021 model year and as far in the future as model year 2026, giving automakers additional time to achieve reductions in fuel consumption.

“Setting a long-term direction through 2030 would be very helpful for the industry, and having the EPA and California aligned so we continue to have one national market in the U.S. would be extremely beneficial for consumers and manufacturers alike,” Bienenfeld said. “I’m sure Honda is not alone in advocating this,” he said, referring to other automakers.