

# Los Angeles Times

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**Trump administration moves on two fronts to challenge California environmental protections.**

**By: Evan Halper & Joseph Tanfani  
April 2, 2018**

The Trump administration openly threatened one of the cornerstones of California's environmental protections Monday, saying that it may revoke the state's ability under the Clean Air Act to impose stricter standards than the federal government sets for vehicle emissions.

The announcement came as the administration confirmed it is tearing up landmark fuel economy rules that formed a key part of the effort by the Obama administration and California officials to combat global warming — and as the Justice Department sued to block a state law that limits the federal government's ability to sell any of the 46 million acres it controls in California.

The double-barreled move marks a sharp assault on the state's efforts to protect its environment as the Trump administration seeks to open more land in the West for mining, drilling and other interests.

California's elected leaders and environmental activists vowed to fight the push, while the administration argued that the state has exceeded its authority under the law.

"Cooperative federalism doesn't mean that one state can dictate standards for the rest of the country," Environmental Protection Agency chief Scott Pruitt said in a statement, which added that California's authority to set its own emissions standards was "being reexamined."

"EPA will set a national standard for greenhouse gas emissions that allows auto manufacturers to make cars that people both want and can afford — while still expanding environmental and safety benefits of newer cars," Pruitt said.

"It's in everyone's best interest to have a national standard, and we look forward to working with all states, including California, as we work to finalize that standard."

Gov. Jerry Brown blasted the federal statement on auto emission rules as a "belated April Fools' Day trick."

"This cynical and meretricious abuse of power will poison our air and jeopardize the health of all Americans," the governor said in a statement.

Although the state's authority to set its own clear air standards has existed for decades, the other measure the administration went after — the law regarding federal lands — is newly adopted. The measure, passed by the Legislature in October, seeks to give California effective veto power over sales of federal land, not just parks or wilderness, in the state.

The law says the state won't recognize any sale, donation or exchange of federal land unless the California State Lands Commission has the right of first refusal over any deal.

The Legislature's own analysis of the bill said it raised "substantial constitutional questions."

The Justice Department asked a federal court in Sacramento to overturn the law, saying it violated the Constitution's supremacy clause, which gives federal law primacy over state law, and a separate clause that gives Congress power "to dispose of" federal property.

The two new moves joined a rapidly lengthening list of battles between California and the Trump administration over a wide range of issues, including the environment, immigration and civil rights. Last month, the Justice Department sued to block three California state laws, saying they were an unconstitutional attempt to thwart enforcement of federal immigration laws.

Pruitt's announcement said that the administration will abandon the federal goal of having vehicles average 55 miles per gallon by 2025. That target will be replaced with a weaker fuel economy standard that the administration will settle on at a later date.

The action sets up the administration for a confrontation with California and a dozen other states that use California's emissions standards.

Under the Clean Air Act, California is the only state that can independently adopt its own emissions standards, but other states can then adopt them. Several of the states that have done so have vowed to defy the administrations' effort to weaken mileage standards.

The current national fuel economy targets represent the single biggest action the federal government has taken to curb greenhouse gases. They are crucial for California and other states to meet their goals for climate action and to reduce smog and other air pollution.

The targets are also essential to an effort led by Brown and others to carry the country toward meeting the obligations in the Paris accord on climate change that the Trump administration is refusing to honor.

The administration's action came at the behest of automakers, which say that the 55 mile per gallon standard will impose too heavy a cost.

But an all-out fight between the federal and state governments over California's power to set emissions standards could backfire on the automakers.

Pruitt's legal ability to revoke California's authority is uncertain and any such move could be tied up in court for years. In the meantime, auto companies would be faced with the complicated and costly prospect of building and selling two different sets of cars — one for California and the other states that follow its standards, and one for the rest of the country.

The resisting states account for more than a third of all car sales. Although automakers have been hopeful some deal could be brokered, perhaps with California agreeing to weaken the more immediate targets in exchange for federal buy-in to more aggressive goals through 2030, that is looking increasingly unlikely.

Pruitt says he's not interested in making such concessions, and California officials say they see no reason to go along with his rollback. The tone between state air regulators and the EPA chief has grown increasingly tense.

"California will not weaken its nationally accepted clean air standards," said Mary Nichols, the state's chief air quality regulator. "Today's decision changes nothing in California and the 12 other states with clean car rules."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) warned that "the years of litigation and investment uncertainty will be far harder on the auto industry than simply living up to the fuel economy standards they once embraced."

"The EPA is willfully ignoring the fact that these emission standards are working. Cars are becoming more fuel efficient and consumers are saving money at the pump," she said. "...There simply is no reason to roll back that progress."

But automakers complain they are confronting a market in which gas prices are low and consumers are more interested in purchasing SUVs and pickups than the fuel-efficient passenger vehicles the federal mandates favor.

"Manufacturers need to sell vehicles that customers need and want today to fund the technological shifts and electrification and automation expected in the future," said a statement from John Bozzella, chief executive of the Assn. of Global Automakers, an industry group representing the U.S. operations of car companies.

The EPA, in its statement announcing that it would propose new, lower fuel economy rules, basically adopted the automakers' analysis, pushing aside opposing views.

Industry officials and analysts note that electric cars and hybrids account for just 3% of vehicle sales in the United States, even as they are taking off in other countries. Environmentalists blame the companies, saying they are putting too much of their marketing and product development energy into SUVs.

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The more immediate dilemma that automakers — and consumers — face is how to contend with different rules applying to different parts of the country. Industry analysts say no good would come of it.

"Different standards in a single market will only cause harm to consumers, the environment, the economy, and automakers," Rebecca Lindland, executive analyst at Kelley Blue Book, said in an email. The fallout, she wrote, could include higher car prices, difficulty selling cars across state lines, and possibly more older, higher polluting cars being used as consumers get discouraged from buying new models.

"Nobody wins if we can't come to a single standard agreement which promotes the most fuel-efficient versions of vehicles consumers already want to buy," Lindland said.

The legal battle over federal lands raises a different set of issues.

According to federal officials, the state law could block the Army's plan to convey 78 acres to a developer in the East Bay city of Dublin, a separate Navy contract with a developer for a property called Admiral's Cove in Alameda, and the long-running plan by the Veterans Affairs department to rebuild its 388-acre West Los Angeles campus by leasing land for housing, and to provide an easement for the Purple Line Metro project.

"The Constitution empowers the federal government — not state legislatures — to decide when and how federal lands are sold," Atty. Gen. Jeff Sessions said Monday in a statement announcing the lawsuit.

"California has once again passed an extreme statute found in no other state, to obstruct the federal government," Jesse Panuccio, the acting associate attorney general, told reporters at the Justice Department.

California officials and environmental activists vowed to fight the lawsuit.

"Yet again, Donald Trump and his administration are attacking our state and our very way of life," said Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom, who serves on the lands commission.

"Safeguarding public lands is in our DNA as Californians — so much so that we have enshrined the principle in our state Constitution. We will use every legal and administrative tool to thwart Trump's plans to auction off California's heritage to the highest bidder," Newsom said.

The California law "is aimed at keeping public lands public, even if the federal government decides to sell them off," said Annie Notthoff, an official at the nonpartisan Natural Resources Defense Council.

"More than 75% of Californians recently polled say they oppose Trump's rollback of protections for public lands. This suit is just another tone-deaf greedy grab."

Environmentalists have been seething about an order directing the Bureau of Land Management to rewrite a protection plan for the state's deserts, and the state has filed lawsuits challenging the administration's calls to permit oil drilling off California's coasts and to refashion Obama-administration rules that protect streams and wetlands.