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In California vs. the EPA, it's the state that's fighting to protect the environment

By: Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang

President Trump and the auto industry are teaming up to roll back gas mileage and emissions rules that would deliver a new car fleet in 2025 averaging 36 mpg in real-world driving. Fortunately, California — and a dozen other states — insist we need to keep the tough standard, which is the biggest single step ever taken against climate change.

The Trump administration's counter-arguments make as much sense as buying a pickup truck to haul your latte home from Starbucks.

California's leadership role grows out of its historic smog problems. Under the 1970 Clean Air Act, it is allowed to set air pollution rules tighter than the federal government's. Relying on that authority in 2002, the state adopted a law to reduce cars' carbon dioxide emissions. Twelve states, mostly in the Northeast, followed California's lead. Because automakers didn't want to build cars under two sets of rules, they negotiated with the Obama administration in 2009 to set strong U.S. standards that California accepted.

On Monday, embattled Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt announced plans to trash it — and he has repeatedly threatened to revoke California's authority to set tougher rules than Washington.

How do the carmakers feel? Some publicly claim they oppose this rollback — never mind that their lobbyists stood beside Pruitt on Monday. And privately, their chief executives pitched the cuts to Trump in the White House days after he took office.

The Trump administration and the auto industry have constructed a house of cards to defend their efforts. The technology that makes vehicles more fuel efficient makes cars and trucks more costly, they claim, so people won't buy them. The drop in sales would drive up unemployment. But regardless of cost, they assert, efficient vehicles aren't safe and no one wants them.

Since 2008, average fuel economy has risen 5 mpg. Meanwhile, the industry has been riding high, banking record sales of approximately 17 million vehicles in each of the last three years.

Under the Obama-era rules, autoworker jobs have grown by 700,000, according to the BlueGreen Alliance of labor and environmental organizations. So much for the argument that Ford's then-CEO Mark Fields presented to Trump 14 months ago, that tougher fuel economy standards would cost the industry 1 million jobs.

Efficient vehicles don't sell? How would automakers know? Gas guzzler ads are ubiquitous in what Kantar Media has estimated is the industry's \$14-billion annual marketing campaign. That's no surprise: SUVs and other trucks are the industry's most profitable segment. According to the Detroit News, buyers are paying as much as \$73,000 for some Cadillac Escalades that cost only \$35,000 to produce.

(Would it be churlish to mention that just before they negotiated these rules back in 2009, America's auto industry chieftains readily accepted \$85 billion in bailouts from taxpayers to survive bankruptcy? Or that they stood by President Obama applauding when he unveiled the auto rules, and signed corporate commitments to adhere to them?)

This is auto mechanics, not rocket science. Existing technology such as advanced transmissions, stop-start engines and high-strength, low-weight steel and aluminum deliver mileage improvements. The savings at the gas pump more than cover the cost of the added technology. In fact, car owners will come out far ahead — saving on average \$6,000 on gasoline over the vehicle's life. The planet will come out ahead, too: The improved fleet mileage cuts carbon dioxide pollution by 6 billion tons while slashing the nation's oil appetite by 12 billion barrels.

As for what makes cars safe, it isn't their heft. Smart design and safety features such as automatic emergency braking, electronic stability control and new, strong materials are truly what protect drivers and passengers, said Jason Levine, the executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, with which our Safe Climate Campaign is affiliated.

Automakers also blame the recent drop in gas prices for their failure to sell more fuel-efficient vehicles. But do carmakers truly think gas prices will stay low forever? We're just one Middle East crisis away from a return to \$4-a-gallon gas.

As it seeks to enhance sales of its truck cash cows, the industry is following the same path that nearly killed it a decade ago, when the 2008 recession and rising gas prices caught it unprepared.

California's clean-car leadership already benefits the state, the nation and the world. Now, we are counting on its leaders to stay strong in the face of the Trump-automaker assault on our lungs, our wallets and our atmosphere.

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