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## **Trump's Auto Efficiency Rollback: Losing the Climate Fight, 1 MPG at a Time** **By: Marianne Lavelle**

The Trump administration's plan to halt the drive for more efficient U.S. passenger vehicles will downshift the nation's ambitions on climate change at the same time that it triggers an epic battle with California, the leader on clean cars.

The administration is casting its proposal, issued on Aug. 2, as neutral on climate and even beneficial from a safety standpoint.

But the costs will be enormous, according to those who favor stricter regulations. It's not just that consumers will have to pay the price at the pump, they say—everyone will have to pay for the health and ecological costs of air pollution and global warming. Every new gas-guzzler sold will lock in some of those costs for years to come.

The rule would freeze emissions and efficiency standards at 2020 levels, or the equivalent of 43.7 miles per gallon for passenger cars and 31.3 mpg for SUVs and other light trucks. That would end the steady improvement toward 54 mpg, a goal that the lame duck Obama administration called technically feasible, effective and beneficial to the public. The proposal is certain to be challenged in a public comment period and in court.

### **The Climate Change Imperatives**

In the United States, transportation has surpassed electric power as the most important driver of emissions. The science dictates that net global emissions from energy must decline to zero in the next few decades to avoid the worst risks of climate change.

That simply can't happen in the United States without rapid cuts in tailpipe emissions.

The Trump administration suggests its move would cause U.S. fuel consumption to increase by about 500,000 barrels of oil per day, an amount many experts consider to be an underestimate. The proposal argues the CO2 impact "perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, is relatively small."

Additional emissions would be just a drop in the global bucket, according to the rule, less than one part per billion of extra carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. But in making that estimate, the Trump administration reveals an ominous finding.

By the end of this century, it expects the accumulation of CO2 to reach concentrations of nearly 790 parts per billion, nearly doubling what's there today—and enough to blast far past the goals of the Paris climate treaty.

The New York-based research firm Rhodium Group projects that the impact of the auto standards freeze will begin slowly but build substantially over time. By 2025, the increase in annual emissions will range from 16 million to 37 million metric tons, ballooning to 32 million to 114 million metric tons by 2035. At the high end—the expected track if oil prices stay relatively low—that's equivalent to adding another state the size of New Jersey to the U.S. emissions mix.

Dave Cooke, senior vehicles analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists, calculates that by 2040, the Trump freeze would add a total 2.2 billion metric tons of global warming emissions to the atmosphere. (Total annual U.S. carbon emissions are currently about 5 billion metric tons.)

U.S. law requires environmental assessments consider cumulative environmental impacts from all federal actions.

Instead, the administration's proposal is "slicing and dicing the carbon problem into many small contributions, and then arguing that no one of them alone is big enough to merit control," said Michael Oppenheimer, atmospheric scientist at Princeton University. He called it "a standard dodge."

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Kate Larsen, director at Rhodium, said this would send the wrong signal to the rest of the world.

"As other countries weigh decisions about meeting their Paris climate commitments, they are watching the U.S.—the world's largest economy and second biggest carbon emitter—for signs it will make a real dent emissions," she said in an email. "From a diplomatic and political perspective, the benefits of the CAFE standards are an order of magnitude bigger than their direct atmospheric benefit." Critics accuse the administration of distorting the costs and benefits.

According to the proposal, the fuel economy freeze will result in \$500 billion in net benefits by cutting the costs of vehicles for consumers and compliance costs for industry. But its calculation minimizes the climate costs. That's not just because of its low estimate of emissions. The rule also adopts a dramatically lower estimate of the price society will ultimately pay for damages caused by each ton of carbon pollution—what economists call the "social cost of carbon." The administration's calculations count only climate impacts within U.S. borders and discount future impacts.

In contrast, the research firm Energy Innovation calculates that a freeze will cost the U.S. economy \$450 billion through 2050 while increasing carbon emissions 11 percent through 2025.

### **California's Role as Clean-Car Leader**

In another blow to progress on emissions, the administration proposed to revoke California's authority to establish its own greenhouse gas emissions standards and zero-emissions vehicle program.

Since 1990, California's auto standards have nurtured the development of the modern electric car, and the state is home to half of all EVs sold since 2011. Gov. Jerry Brown set goals of putting 1.5 million zero-emission vehicles on California's roads by 2025, and 5 million by 2030. Eight other states and the District of Columbia have adopted California's ZEV mandate.

California ratcheted the vehicle air pollution fight to a new level when it proposed the first-ever global warming emissions standards for automobiles in 2002. That effort was delayed when President George W. Bush's administration denied California's waiver. The Obama administration not only reversed that decision, it negotiated a deal to bring federal and California standards in line.

Automakers want to continue to have uniform national standards on greenhouse gases, even though they'd like them to be looser, as they told Trump soon after he took office. Fearing a prolonged legal battle with California, which has vowed to "vigorously defend" its program, automakers have asked the Trump administration repeatedly to work out a deal with the state. "Climate change is real," said the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers in a May letter to the administration.

But the administration instead is proposing the course urged by conservative groups, including a number funded by the petrochemical billionaire Koch brothers and other foes of regulation, who decry California's mandates.

The Trump administration argues that California's greenhouse gas and zero emissions vehicle standards may look like pollution regulations, but they are, in essence, fuel economy standards, which it claims are preempted by federal law.

The auto industry tried and failed to block the California standards in 2007 using that same legal argument before federal judges in Vermont and California.

Despite the landmark decision in *Massachusetts v. EPA* that the laws governing emissions and efficiency operate independently, the administration asserts that the Supreme Court has not explicitly ruled on whether one preempts the other. Trump's team appears willing to try its luck there.

Also, in a week when 16 wildfires ravaged California, including a blaze that killed six in Redding, the Trump administration argued the state had no "compelling or extraordinary conditions" that would merit its own greenhouse gas standards.

"Any effects of global climate change (e.g. water supply issues, increases in wildfires, effects on agriculture) could certainly affect California," the proposal said. "But those effects would also equally affect other parts of the United States."

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra offered a rejoinder on a conference call with reporters soon after the proposal was announced: "Seven months ago it wasn't fires but torrential rain and mudslides," he said. "It needs to be stated—the Earth is not flat, and climate change is real, and pollution is fueling the death and destruction we're seeing."

The Trump administration said that the reason Congress gave California authority under the Clean Air Act was to address local air quality problems like smog, not global warming. It brushed aside the fact that California's regulations would curb smog-forming pollution at the same time it cut carbon emissions.

"Parts of California have a real and significant local air pollution problem," the proposal said, "but CO2 is not part of that local problem."

### **Safety: An Old Argument Heard Again**

The Trump administration estimates that freezing fuel economy standards will reduce highway fatalities by up to 1,000 lives annually, with 12,000 lives saved over the lifetimes of vehicles purchased through 2029.

To support this claim, it resurrects an old argument—that carmakers will meet fuel economy standards by making cars that are lighter and less able to withstand crashes.

And it adds an extra twist. The proposal says that strict standards are causing consumers to hang on to old cars longer because passenger vehicles have become too costly. Older vehicles are less safe and less efficient. Therefore, it reasons, freezing fuel economy will spark faster turnover that drives safety and efficiency improvements.

"To the extent new vehicle purchases offset pending vehicle retirements, delaying new purchases in favor of continuing to use an aging vehicle affects the overall safety of the on-road fleet," the Trump administration said.

The proposal cites statistics from the consulting group IHS Markit showing that the average age of autos has reached a record 12 years.

A number of statistics undercut the Trump administration's arguments. As fuel economy standards have steadily tightened over the past eight years, new car sales saw an unprecedented seven-year growth trend, followed by a slight decline to 17.1 million cars and light trucks sold in 2017. Despite the dip, it was the fourth-best sales year in U.S. history.

Over the decades, as passenger vehicles have become cleaner and more efficient in the United States, fatality rates have fallen by more than half—from 3.35 deaths per hundred million miles of travel in 1975 to 1.16 in 2017.

The question of whether fuel economy standards erode safety by "lightweighting" cars has been extensively studied. The National Academies of Science brought together that research for its 2015 analysis of the Obama standards, and concluded they were unlikely to lead to safety problems.

A working paper published last year by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that lower average vehicle weight was actually associated with a reduction in fatalities.

Chester France, a former senior executive in the Office of Transportation and Air Quality at the Environmental Protection Agency who is now a consultant to the Environmental Defense Fund, said the Trump administration is making its case based on "deeply flawed assumptions." He said there are "thousands of pages of data showing that the Clean Car Standards are fully compatible with safer vehicles and fewer fatalities."

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