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Trump’s EPA formally launches rollback of fuel economy standards

By: Evan Halper, Tony Barboza, and David Lauter

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration Thursday pushed ahead with plans to unravel the federal government’s most effective action to fight climate change — aggressive fuel economy standards aimed at getting the nation’s cars and trucks to average more than 50 miles per gallon by 2025.

After months of discussion and drafts, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration formally unveiled their plan to rewrite those rules and replace them with ones so lax even automakers are wary.

The administration’s proposal would freeze miles-per-gallon targets in 2020. It would also move to end California’s current power to set its own, higher standards.

The administration’s proposal asserts that “attempting to solve climate change, even in part” is “fundamentally different” from the Clean Air Act’s “original purpose of addressing smog-related air quality problems.”

The administration’s proposal could set off a high-stakes legal battle with California and the 13 other states that follow its more stringent rules. Those states argue the Clean Air Act empowers them to keep the Obama-era fuel economy standards in place in their markets.

The states following California’s lead account for more than a third of the vehicles sold nationwide.

The Trump administration proposal could also invalidate California’s mandate that automakers sell a certain number of electric vehicles.

The rollback would undermine efforts by California and several other states to meet commitments the U.S. made in the Paris agreement on climate change. It would also worsen air quality problems in Southern California and other areas where officials are already struggling to clean smog and ease rates of asthma and other illnesses.

The release of the administration’s proposal was repeatedly delayed in recent weeks as officials debated how aggressively to push. In the end, the White House approved taking a hard line, despite fears of some administration officials that their plan is based on weak evidence that will not hold up under court challenge.

The prospect of an extended legal fight has discomfited automakers, who had asked the administration to relax the Obama-era rules but don’t want to see the U.S. market split in two, with different models of cars required in blue and red states.

Their unease was reflected in a statement released by Gloria Bergquist, vice president of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which urged negotiations between California and the federal government “to find a common sense solution that sets continued increases in vehicle efficiency standards while also meeting the needs of America’s drivers.”

The administration argues its proposal will reduce traffic fatalities by keeping the cost of vehicles down compared with the current emissions standards, which it claims are a safety hazard that “restrict the American people from being able to afford newer vehicles with more advanced safety features, better fuel economy, and associated environmental benefits.”

“More realistic standards can save lives while continuing to improve the environment,” said EPA Acting Administrator Andrew Wheeler.

Vehicles are the single largest cause of emissions in the U.S. that cause global warming, recently surpassing the electricity sector. The plunge in natural gas prices and other market forces have steadily lowered the climate impact of utilities, but transportation is proving more stubborn. Electric cars and trucks still account for a tiny fraction of those sold, and driver preference for SUVs, along with relatively low gas prices, have inhibited progress there.

The existing federal fuel economy targets, which were championed by California, ensure automakers keep moving toward higher efficiency vehicles, as other nations also require. The impact of freezing those targets for six years, as the administration favors, would be enormous.

The Bay Area firm Energy Innovation, which models the environmental impact of energy policies, projects the proposal would increase U.S. fuel use 20 percent by 2035. The firm projects the policy would cost the U.S. economy \$457 billion and cause 13,000 deaths by 2050, as air quality suffers.

But the Trump administration is arguing its plan, which it dubbed Safer and Affordable Fuel Efficient Vehicles Rule, or SAFE, would save lives, replacing current standards that officials claim drive up the cost of vehicles too much and create a safety hazard for motorists.

Those assertions are refuted by thousands of pages of data the Obama administration used in developing the regulation. In scrapping it, the administration is relying on disputed modeling that projects vehicles that get more miles to the gallon would lead motorists to drive more frequently, thus increasing the number of traffic fatalities.

The administration also projects the efficiency rules would drive up the price of cars enough to push some buyers out of the market, leaving them to remain in older vehicles lacking life-saving new technologies like assisted braking and blind spot warning.

The argument may prove a tough sell in court, where attorneys for states and environmental groups will come armed with a wealth of data undermining it.

“The fleet of new vehicles today is the most fuel efficient ever, and they have gotten safer every year,” said Luke Tonachel, director of clean vehicles and fuels at the Natural Resources Defense Council. “These arguments are not new. They have failed before.”

Federal data show the increased cost consumers would pay for the more efficient vehicles is dwarfed by the amount of money they would save at the pump, undermining the argument that drivers will stay in older, unsafe vehicles, advocates for the tougher rules say.

At a May meeting in the White House, auto firms appealed to Trump to tap the brakes on the administration’s aggressive rollback plan. He assured them he would, ordering his EPA chief and Transportation secretary to try to broker a deal with California.

Those negotiations have gone nowhere. California is confident the administration has no legal authority to revoke the waiver it has been granted under the Clean Air Act allowing it to keep the Obama-era rules in place. In May, California and 16 other states filed a preemptive lawsuit arguing the rollback would be illegal.

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