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Lighter-weight aluminum, which many automakers have turned to as a replacement for steel, protects motorists better because it crumples and absorbs the impact of crashes better than heavier materials, said Daniel Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety.

Opinion| A Reckless Scheme on Auto Emissions

By: The New York Times Editorial Board

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The Trump administration's decision to try to weaken President Barack Obama's landmark 2012 agreement to increase fuel efficiency and decrease global warming emissions from automobiles is dismaying on so many levels that it is hard to know where to begin.

The proposal from the current administration would freeze the average fuel economy after 2021 at about 37 miles per gallon; the Obama-era rule would have required automakers to hit an average of about 54 miles per gallon by 2025. The Trump plan would also revoke a waiver that the federal government granted to California, which allows the state to set stricter standards because of its particular air pollution problems.

Cars and trucks are currently the largest source of planet-warming emissions in the United States.

The proposal from the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation sets up a protracted legal fight with California and the 13 other states, including New York and New Jersey, that have chosen to follow its stronger standards. The state's waiver was authorized under the 1970 Clean Air Act and has been renewed dozens of times by the E.P.A. It is one more nail in the coffin of Mr. Obama's climate strategy, and further increases the already long odds of reaching Mr. Obama's pledge at the 2015 Paris summit on climate change to reduce America's greenhouse gas emissions by more than a quarter below 2005 levels by 2025.

Of the Trump plan, Gov. Jerry Brown of California said in a statement: "Under his reckless scheme, motorists will pay more at the pump, get worse gas mileage and breathe dirtier air. California will fight this stupidity in every conceivable way possible."

To justify the unjustifiable, the Trump administration is deploying a series of bogus arguments that freezing the Obama standards would prevent nearly 13,000 traffic fatalities. That number stands in stark contrast to the Obama administration's conclusion that its standards would lower fatalities by 100.

The Trump administration uses three dubious assumptions to reach its conclusion. First, it asserts that people who buy more fuel-efficient cars would drive more — about 1.3 trillion miles more than previous estimates — because it would be cheaper to do so and they would, thus, be at greater risk of accidents. This is what experts call the rebound effect, but few researchers say the effect is this strong. One scholar, Kenneth Gillingham, a Yale economist, whose work the government relied on to come up with its numbers, told The Times that the administration ignored more recent work that showed a much smaller effect.

Next, the administration says that because more fuel-efficient cars would be more expensive, fewer people would buy them and they would choose to keep driving older cars that tend to be less safe than newer models. This argument is belied by the fact that car sales have been strong in recent years, even as fuel economy improved to 25.1 miles per gallon in 2018 models, from 21.8 miles per gallon in 2011, according to the Consumer Federation of America. On average, Americans bought 17 million cars annually over the last five years while about 13 million older models went off the road.

Finally, Trump officials claim that automakers would have to make their vehicles lighter to meet the Obama standards, which would make them less safe. This is bunk. **Lighter-weight aluminum, which many automakers have turned to as a replacement for steel, protects motorists better because it crumples and absorbs the impact of crashes better than heavier materials, said Daniel Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety.** Further, newer models tend to have more sophisticated safety features, like automatic braking and lane-departure warnings, that over time should make American roads safer.

On a global level, at a time when the rest of the world (and even many American industries) is investing in newer, cleaner forms of energy, the administration's policy change would put American companies further back in the race to build more efficient and less polluting vehicles.

And it ignores, as have President Trump's other actions, the rock-solid scientific consensus that without swift action to limit fossil fuel emissions, like those from cars, the consequences of climate change — rising seas, devastating droughts, wildfires and floods, and widespread species extinction — will get steadily worse.

Of course, none of this was unexpected from a man who once described climate change as a hoax invented by the Chinese to hurt American businesses and who has surrounded himself with officials who, in many cases, owe their political success to the largess of oil, gas and coal companies. Mr. Trump withdrew from the Paris treaty on June 1 of last year, less than five months into his presidency, by which time he had already ordered the demolition of nearly all of Mr. Obama's policies to reduce greenhouse emissions.

The Clean Power Plan, aimed at closing old coal-fired power plants, is stuck in the courts while the E.P.A. devises a largely meaningless substitute. Proposals to reduce emissions of methane, a short-lived though very powerful greenhouse gas, from natural gas facilities are under challenge in the Interior Department. An international treaty to phase out another powerful heat-trapping gas, the hydrofluorocarbons widely used in air-conditioners, languishes on Mr. Trump's desk.

But of all these rollbacks, perhaps the most galling is the weakening of the fuel-economy standards, which seems a betrayal of history. Just a few years ago everyone seemed to be on board. In 2007, after years in which the fuel economy of the American car fleet had stagnated, Congress asked for improvements. Soon after taking office, Mr. Obama announced a new and much improved set of fuel-economy standards based on greenhouse gas emissions. At a Rose Garden ceremony, he was flanked by officials from 10 automakers and their unions, as well as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California — an unusual and hopeful display of partnership.

In a sense, the automakers had little choice: A federal bailout had rescued two of them, General Motors and Chrysler, from the brink of collapse. Further, without California's participation in the deal, the entire industry would have faced the unwelcome prospect of two sets of fuel-economy standards — something that is much more likely now.

Though it took several years to iron out details, the net result was an agreement to roughly double the fuel economy of passenger vehicles while saving drivers billions of dollars at the pump, reducing carbon emissions and oil dependence and easing the way for a transition to a new fleet of cleaner and safer vehicles able to compete anywhere in the world.

Mr. Obama, in short, forged the kind of deal that the Great Dealmaker in the White House likes to boast about. Now that very same dealmaker is trying to kill it with a plan that has only losers.

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