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The Myth That a Cleaner Car Is Less Safe Than a Dirty One

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To justify rolling back auto gas mileage and emissions rules, the Trump administration has fabricated a false conflict between safety and improved fuel economy. The administration is wrong. Americans must have both, and can.

Encouraged by automakers to roll back President Barack Obama's stringent fuel-efficiency rules, the administration unveiled a proposal on Thursday doing just that. Its preferred option: bringing progress to a halt by requiring no further mileage improvements in new cars and light trucks beyond 2020.

As written, the original standard would cut tailpipe pollution in half and deliver a new-car fleet in 2025 averaging an estimated 36 miles per gallon in real-world driving, equivalent to about 50 m.p.g. in test conditions. It is the biggest single step any nation has taken to fight climate change. The Trump plan would lower that average to 29 m.p.g. on the road and spew an additional 2.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide, the key global warming pollutant, by 2040, according to estimates by the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The administration's plan cooks the books: It claims clean-car technology would cost far more than the Obama team projected. It assumes that higher sticker prices for new cars will keep Americans in older, less safe vehicles. And it predicts they will drive far more miles than in the past — 1.3 trillion more than an exhaustive Obama administration analysis forecast, thus exposing them to greater risk.

The administration is ignoring three central facts:

Savings at the pump greatly outweigh the cost of gas-saving technology. Because cars and light trucks would need less gas, an average owner would save nearly \$6,000 over the life of a 2025 vehicle under the Obama plan, even after paying for the gas-saving technology. (Since the Obama targets took effect in 2012, consumers have saved more than \$60 billion.)

Consumers haven't balked at buying cleaner vehicles with advanced technology, despite slightly higher prices. Even as the standard has grown increasingly tough, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers has bragged of the industry's "unprecedented seven-year growth trend." The Consumer Federation of America reports that consistent new-car sales of nearly 17 million a year are outpacing the annual retirement of roughly 13 million older vehicles.

And, since fuel-efficiency rules took effect in the mid-1970s, the government's own data demonstrate that vehicles have grown increasingly clean and safe. For more than 40 years, car companies have claimed that they could deliver efficiency or safety, but not both. Yet fuel economy has improved 88.5 percent over the past four decades while motor vehicle fatalities per miles have dropped 65 percent.

The administration's attack also plays on the myth that greater weight equals greater safety and ignores engineering improvements — lane-departure warnings, automatic emergency braking, and the increasing use of high-strength, low-weight steel and aluminum — that are saving lives today.

Compared with lighter vehicles, heavier ones "do not brake or handle as well and are more likely to roll over," John German, a senior fellow at the International Council on Clean Transportation, told us.

The stronger, lighter materials, which save gas by reducing weight, do a better job protecting a vehicle's occupants because they absorb up to twice as much energy as conventional steel, and aluminum can be engineered to fold on impact, reducing crash forces.

"The standard is pushing automakers to use advanced materials and other technology to cut pollution and make us all safer on the road," Jason Levine, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, told us. His group is affiliated with our Safe Climate Campaign.

This is auto mechanics, not rocket science. Ford proved that efficiency and safety go hand in hand when it converted the steel bodies of its F-150 pickups to aluminum. It lopped 700 pounds from America's best-

selling model and helped lift mileage by four m.p.g. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration upgraded the truck to a five-star safety rating, as it did all other aluminum-body vehicles it crash tested. Fifty-five percent of fatalities occur in single-vehicle crashes, in which, for example, a vehicle strikes a bridge abutment or other stationary object. Smart engineering and technology, not increased weight, are the key to protecting a car's occupants. So, according to Insurance Institute for Highway Safety data, chances of surviving such a crash are better in a Chevrolet Volt, one of the most efficient vehicles, than in any number of much heavier gas-guzzling trucks.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, with the Environmental Protection Agency, plays a central role in determining the rules' stringency. But the highway agency has a long history of protecting automakers instead of the public.

Automakers, too, have a long history of fighting safety measures, objecting to requirements that they install airbags, seatbelt pretensioners and electronic stability to prevent rollovers. All are now standard features.

When auto executives asked President Trump to start rolling the mileage rules downhill, they didn't anticipate that he would remove the brakes. But his plan would increase pollution and costs at the pump. Facing potential public relations headaches, even automakers distanced themselves from it as the administration prepared the new rules.

The original standard would deliver cars and light trucks that are safer on the road and safer for the planet. If the Trump administration scraps it, both drivers and the climate will suffer.

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