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General Motors defies Trump: 'We can do better'

By: Maxine Joselow

Breaking with the Trump administration, General Motors Co. wants to expand California's landmark program for getting more clean cars on the road.

GM plans to propose establishing a national program modeled after California's zero-emissions vehicle (ZEV) program, the company said yesterday. That announcement puts America's largest automaker at odds with the administration, which wants to eliminate the Golden State's program altogether.

But environmentalists remain skeptical of the announcement, calling it a "distraction" meant to burnish the company's green image.

GM plans to outline the proposal in regulatory comments filed later today with EPA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, spokesman Pat Morrissey said in an email.

In August, EPA and NHTSA proposed capping Obama-era vehicle efficiency requirements at 2020 levels. They also proposed unwinding California's authority to set its own vehicle efficiency rules, including the ZEV mandate (Greenwire, Aug. 2).

The two agencies will stop taking comments on the proposal at midnight tonight.

"We know that we can do better" than the Trump administration's proposal, Mark Reuss, GM's executive vice president of global product development, said on a call with reporters yesterday. "We know that the industry can do better than that."

Reuss added that the company wants to "create policies that help move our country more quickly to an all-electric, zero-emissions future."

California and nine other states already participate in the ZEV program, which requires automakers to sell a certain number of electric cars and trucks. The number of vehicles is linked to the automaker's overall sales within the state.

GM estimates that a nationwide program would put 7 million electric cars on the road and prevent 375 million tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere by 2030.

'Really lame effort'

Some environmental advocates don't think GM's comments are sincere.

Luke Tonachel, director of clean vehicles and fuels at the Natural Resources Defense Council, called the GM proposal a distraction. He noted that GM hasn't explicitly expressed support for maintaining the existing clean car standards.

"The existing federal and state clean car standards comprise the single largest action our nation is taking to address climate change, and any proposals need to start with preserving them," Tonachel said. "If automakers want to talk about additional measures that could help spur the adoption of electric vehicles, we would love to work with them."

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Madeline Page, clean cars campaign coordinator with Public Citizen, said GM's actions speak louder than its words.

GM CEO Mary Barra today wrote in an opinion piece in USA Today: "A single, 50-state solution will help move the U.S. to a leadership position in electrification."

But the CEOs of major automakers — including Barra — convened at the White House shortly after President Trump's inauguration to discuss softening the Obama-era car rules (Greenwire, Jan. 24, 2017).

"I'm more than skeptical. I think it's totally a distraction that they are deploying here on this last day of the comment period," Page said.

"Their actions to weaken the standards are problematic," she added. "And they're not commenting on what they're going to say about the current rules we have in place."

Other automakers have also sought to distance themselves from the Trump administration's rollback of the car rules, which could lead to a lengthy legal battle and prolonged regulatory uncertainty.

Ford Motor Co. CEO Jim Hackett told the Midwestern Governors Association in Columbus, Ohio, last month: "We're in favor of keeping the standard, not a rollback" (Greenwire, Sept. 21).

In its own regulatory comments, Honda Motor Co. said the rollback would "bring years of uncertainty for the auto industry" while state and federal regulators hashed it out in court.

"A far better path would be for federal and state policy makers to negotiate a national program that is acceptable, if not ideal, for all parties including automakers," Honda wrote.

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