



## **It's up to California to save us from this Trump rollback.**

**By: Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang**

As President Donald Trump races to gut the Obama administration's auto mileage and emissions program, the California Air Resources Board, an agency little known outside the state, could help protect us from the rollback.

The Obama plan, developed jointly with automakers and California officials, sought to make automobiles more fuel efficient and would deliver a fleet of new cars and trucks in 2025 averaging 36 mpg on the road. By almost doubling gas mileage and halving emissions of carbon dioxide, the primary global warming pollutant, the Obama standard is the biggest single step taken against climate change in history. And by prodding bailed-out automakers to build increasingly clean vehicles, it better positions the companies to compete with more-efficient imports.

But in August, the Trump administration unveiled a draft proposal that would halt mileage and emissions improvements after 2020. The result: A fleet-wide average of only 29 mpg in real-world driving, according to an engineer at the Union of Concerned Scientists with whom we spoke. Officials are reviewing responses from automakers, environmentalists and others, and we expect them to announce a final decision in the coming months.

The stakes? The health of our planet and the future competitiveness of the American auto industry. A US government report issued in November that presented the far-reaching and frightening reality of global warming makes the need clear. General Motors' announcement days later that it will stop building many of its most fuel-efficient vehicles demonstrates the rollback's consequences.

Enter the California Air Resources Board, which has been negotiating with Trump aides over the plan's future.

Currently, California has the authority to write its own anti-pollution provisions under the Clean Air Act -- something automakers have long chafed at. Because more than a dozen states follow its rules, California's decisions govern 40% of the nation's auto market.

But Trump is also attacking the board's authority to set its own tougher anti-pollution rules. If California successfully pushes back and maintains this power, the auto companies will have to decide whether to make cleaner cars for the 40% that have adopted its law and dirtier vehicles for the rest -- a logistical nightmare -- or cleaner cars for all.

As it talks with administration officials and auto lobbyists behind closed doors, the California board should:

- 1.** Fight any Trump-promoted compromise that weakens the rules to which auto executives agreed with Obama in 2011.
- 2.** Resist auto lobbyists' wheedling for Hummer-size loopholes that would result in the industry churning out even more gas-guzzling and polluting SUVs and other trucks, undercutting the rules' effectiveness because the trucks enjoy weaker standards than cars.
- 3.** Stand up to any Trump administration effort to revoke the state's unique standard-setting rights.
- 4.** And thwart automakers' pressure for only negligible improvements post-2025, when the Obama-set standards would lapse, even if Trump doesn't roll them back.

The auto companies may try to inveigle the agency into approving weaker standards in exchange for manufacturer promises to increase electric vehicle production modestly. Surely, the air pollution agency in a state already reeling from global warming-fed fires and drought will resist such a trade-off for more pollution.

Meanwhile, Ford, GM and Chrysler, which have been after Trump to torpedo the Obama rules since he took office, are now realizing their efforts may backfire when it comes to consumer perceptions. A recent Consumer Reports survey found that gas mileage is "the number one attribute vehicle owners would like to see improved."

Wary of such consumer concerns, automakers have started using strategic language when advocating for less stringent regulations. Rather than openly advocating weaker mileage and emissions rules, they claim they are seeking "flexibilities" -- their euphemism for pollution-producing loopholes.

With the SUVs, pickups and minivans subject to weaker rules than cars, automakers can get away with building less fuel-efficient vehicles while throwing in baubles such as extra cup holders to run up the price.

Some drivers actually need trucks for work -- not just hauling a cappuccino from Starbucks. For the rest of us, with its authority intact California can lead the country by encouraging people to buy the most efficient vehicles that meet their needs. It can marry stringent pollution rules with such clean-car incentives as lower registration fees, meaningful tax credits and convenient parking for the cleanest vehicles. And, of course, we need better mass transit so people drive less.

The rules that the Obama administration negotiated with automakers would keep 6 billion tons of carbon dioxide pollution out of the atmosphere. A bonus: They'd save 12 billion barrels of oil and \$1 trillion at the pump, estimated at recent gas prices.

Trump's plan may fool some people, but it can't fool the atmosphere. Global warming means fiercer hurricanes, rising sea levels and deadly droughts and wildfires. California can protect us all by slowing the race to the climate cliff.

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