



Biden's new electric car goals are an Edsel masquerading as a Tesla

For all their talk about turning out these emissions-free cars and trucks, auto companies have made few of them. The law should hold them accountable.

Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang | Opinion contributors
August 6, 2021 | Updated August 9, 2021

The United States needs to urgently [slash global warming pollution](#) with strictly enforced standards that phase out sales of new gasoline-engine cars and trucks by 2030 and dramatically boost fuel efficiency until then. But the [emissions cuts in the auto plan](#) President Joe Biden issued Thursday are too timid – and rely too heavily on automakers' voluntary commitments to produce electric vehicles. They won't cut it.

Indeed, the loophole-riddled Swiss cheese rules fail to surpass those that [automakers agreed to nine years ago](#) when the climate crisis was less severe. They would trim fleetwide new-vehicle emissions (and increase average gas mileage) far less than the 7% yearly needed to make up for Trump-era rollbacks.

Automakers shirk commitment

The plan ballyhoos electric vehicles, touting a hoped-for new-vehicle fleet that could be up to 50% EVs in 2030. But automakers gave Biden no commitment that they would reach even that inadequate target. Voluntary pledges from auto companies make a New Year's resolution to lose weight look like a legally binding contract. Because automakers have demonstrated they can't be trusted (See: [Volkswagen diesel-gate](#)), compliance with every element of the package must be written in stone.

Consider the industry's history of playing bait and switch at the White House: Major automakers and President Barack Obama negotiated the [annual 5% improvements in gas mileage and emissions](#) in 2012. With those gains, the 2025 new-vehicle fleet would have averaged [36 mpg](#) on the road. The plan would have kept 6 billion tons of heat-trapping carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere while saving consumers \$1 trillion on gas.

But four days after President Donald Trump's inauguration, company CEOs successfully pitched him to roll back that negotiated deal. Trump effectively froze the rules beyond 2020, leaving consumers with cars and trucks that cost us more at the pump – and a new-vehicle fleet that would average no better than 29 mpg in 2026.

Transportation emits more greenhouse gases than even the power plants that deliver electricity. Burning 1 gallon of gasoline, whether in a hybrid or a Hummer, pumps [25 pounds of carbon dioxide](#) into the atmosphere. But with strong rules, the United States can take the biggest single step of any nation to fight global warming.

To fend off the worst climate catastrophes, Biden has set a goal of [net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050](#). Because some vehicles remain on the road at least 20 years, we can't reach that crucial target unless we phase out sales of new gas-powered cars and light trucks by the end of this decade.

Yet for all their talk about turning out these emissions-free cars and trucks, auto companies have made few of them. Ford sold only [about 11,000 EVs in the 12 months ending in April](#), while turning out [800,000 gas-powered F-150 pickups](#) last year. Even with the president on the White House lawn Thursday, their shiny new EVs arrayed on the driveway, the companies' brass wouldn't make binding commitments.

Avoiding improvements for quick cash

Automakers have long had the technology needed to achieve real improvements: electric motors; safe, high-strength lightweight steel and aluminum; continuously variable transmissions and aerodynamic designs, for example. With them, consumers would save more at the pump than the improvements would cost.

But rather than make full use of the gas- and dollar-saving improvements, carmakers pumped roughly [\\$14 billion yearly](#) into TV and web ads and other marketing to ramp up production of gas-guzzling SUVs and pickups. For years they've saddled customers – who often haul little more than a cappuccino from Starbucks – with [truck markups](#) of as much as \$35,000.

On Biden's arrival, the industry successfully lobbied for loopholes that allow it to make yet more SUVs and pickups. In exchange, the companies made fingers-crossed pledges that they would eventually turn out millions of EVs – a devil's bargain that does little to cut overall emissions.

Biden's auto standard is an Edsel masquerading as a Tesla. Before it becomes final later this year, he must strengthen it. Global warming is burning forests, roasting the West and worsening storms. Now is not the time to propose clunker rules for today and promise strong ones for tomorrow. The stakes are too high to aim low.

Dan Becker directs the Center for Biological Diversity's [Safe Climate Transport Campaign](#). James Gerstenzang is the campaign's editorial director.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/08/06/biden-electric-car-gm-tesla-charging-stations-zero-emissions-ford/5505518001/>