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No porridge or bears, but Biden's clean car goals get Goldilocks comparison

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A storybook reference came to mind when U.S. Rep. Dan Kildee, D-Flint Twp., considered the Biden administration’s clean car announcement Thursday that envisions half the new passenger cars and light trucks sold in this country producing zero tailpipe emissions in less than a decade.

“This is sort of a Goldilocks goal. It’s just right. Not too much, not too little. It’s just right,” Kildee said.

While not everyone would agree with that sentiment, Kildee's comments highlight the balancing act at play in pushing to transition the U.S. vehicle fleet away from internal combustion engines. The goal, Kildee said, is bold, achievable and not too disruptive to current vehicle production, a key concern for a congressman who represents a substantial number of autoworkers.

Kildee compared the current moment to one faced by the auto industry decades ago, on the heels of the energy crisis of the 1970s. U.S. automakers did not react to the dramatic consumer shift toward more fuel-efficient vehicles and paid a price they have never recovered from, Kildee said.

“American manufacturers didn’t see around the corner, and as a result, they lost market share that they never got back. We can’t afford to let that happen when it comes to the transition to (electric vehicles),” Kildee said. “In 10 years, the biggest mistake would be that we miss this

moment, and we have no one making vehicles in the United States, and that's not an impossible scenario if we don't embrace the future."

The executive order that President Joe Biden [signed Thursday on zero-emission vehicle sales](#) and his administration's proposed stricter vehicle mileage and emissions standards represent a sharp break with the Trump administration's approach, but a debate has been brewing for weeks among many environmental groups, industry watchers and others over whether the administration's focus would meet the moment.

Reactions collected by the Free Press on Thursday were predominantly, although not universally, supportive of the administration's efforts, which, in essence, try to do two things — tackle climate change by reducing the carbon footprint of the U.S. transportation sector and successfully compete with China, and other countries, on electric vehicle production.

The biggest complaint from some, however, is that the efforts do not go far enough because the climate crisis demands a more aggressive reduction of greenhouse gases.

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"Today's proposal relies on unenforceable voluntary commitments from unreliable carmakers to make up to 50% of their fleets electric by 2030. These are the companies that tore up the agreement they made with President Obama to cut pollution, so why would anyone trust them now?" Becker said in a statement. "We urgently need to cut greenhouse gas pollution — and voluntary measures won't cut it. Voluntary pledges by auto companies make a New Year's weight-loss resolution look like a legally binding contract."

That skepticism was also expressed by other groups, including the Consumer Federation of America, which questioned "leaving America to trust automakers who've let us down in the past" but still offered support for the effort.

"Despite our concerns, the president's proposal will save financially strapped Americans money, increase the availability of electric vehicles, provide good-paying jobs, and move us to cleaner air," Jack Gillis, the federation's executive director, said in a statement. "Our surveys over the past decade show that consumers want more efficient vehicles and support federal standards that require improvements. In addition, they understand that gas prices will continue to fluctuate, so future standards will protect their pocketbooks."

What might be different now than in the past, however, involves very public pledges and actual products from automakers. Notably, each of the Detroit Three — General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, which formed in January from the merger of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and Peugeot maker PSA Group — have announced billions of dollars in investments on electrification and have aggressive timelines for electric vehicle launches even as they continue to make money from gas-powered pickups and SUVs.

Tesla, which has a market cap exceeding all three automakers, is all about electric vehicles, and it's now profitable, and Ford, for instance, is finding success with its own electric offerings, proclaiming in its latest earnings conference call that the electric [Mustang Mach-E is profitable, too.](#)

The guests at the signing ceremony on Thursday were clearly there in part to also signify a new, more cooperative direction. GM Chair and CEO Mary Barra, Ford President and CEO Jim Farley, Stellantis North America Chief Operating Officer Mark Stewart and UAW President Ray Curry joined the president, along with Michigan's U.S. Senate delegation, Gary Peters and Debbie Stabenow, and other key lawmakers and administration officials.

The three automakers even released a joint statement, emphasizing both support for the administration's goals as well as a call for more investments in purchase incentives and charging infrastructure. Electric vehicles are currently a small but rapidly growing piece of the new vehicle market, but range anxiety, a concern expressed by some consumers that a vehicle will not have enough charge to get a vehicle to its destination, does have the effect, warranted or not, of hampering demand.

"Today, Ford, GM and Stellantis announce their shared aspiration to achieve sales of 40-50% of annual U.S. volumes of electric vehicles (battery electric, fuel cell and plug-in hybrid vehicles) by 2030 in order to move the nation closer to a zero-emissions future consistent with Paris climate goals," the automaker statement said. "Our recent product, technology, and investment announcements highlight our collective commitment to be leaders in the U.S. transition to electric vehicles."

The automaker statement said the shift could only be achieved through consumer and manufacturing incentives, investments in research and development as well as a comprehensive charging network, which are elements in Biden's proposed infrastructure plan.

The UAW, in its own statement, focused on the need to build "the vehicles of the future" in the United States, and said the country is falling behind China and Europe.

The "announcement on emissions standards brings more certainty and better planning for the auto industry and UAW member future jobs. While the UAW notes that the companies have made voluntary commitments on Electric Vehicles, the UAW focus is not on hard deadlines or percentages, but on preserving the wages and benefits that have been the heart and soul of the American middle class," UAW President Curry said. "The members of the UAW, current and future, are ready to build these electric cars and trucks and the batteries that go in them. Our members are America's secret weapon in winning this global race. That is why, today we stand with the President and support his ambition not just to grow electric vehicles but also our capacity to produce them domestically with good wages and benefits and the right to bargain and urge Congress to seize this opportunity for the sake of working people and our country's future."

U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Dearborn, in a Facebook post, talked about the benefits of the administration's plans but said they need to be accompanied by additional investments included in the infrastructure proposals being debated in Congress.

“I have put a lot of hard work in over the last few months to get to where we are today working with everyone, trying to protect jobs, the environment, get us as a country where we need to be, to ensure consumers have safe, reliable, efficient, fun and performing vehicles, that we keep jobs for the workers of my district and others around the country in the U.S. and that they pay a good, decent wage, that we reduce carbon emissions significantly, that vehicles be affordable, that we build out an infrastructure to support it, that we upgrade the power grid, that we develop a battery with range that consumers have confidence in, that we develop the minerals in the U.S., that we build those batteries in the U.S. And this simplifies what the objectives of the work is and there is a lot more ahead,” Dingell said in her post.

Despite the support, some groups, such as the conservative Mackinac Center for Public Policy, rejected the need for a sweeping policy shift.

“When it comes to efficiency, government mandates struggle to keep up with societal evolution. Rather than listening to markets, they push their own wants and desires. Or worse, they force their friends and campaign donors interests ahead, stifling innovation with excessive regulation or subsidies. Currently, the EV market is one of the best examples of this issue. It is clear that the Biden administration’s push for electric vehicles is not driven by consumer demand, but political motives,” according to Jason Hayes, the center’s director of environmental policy.

But Elizabeth Hauptman, who lives in Brighton and is a field organizer for the Michigan chapter of the advocacy group Moms Clean Air Force, took a positive view on what the efforts signal. Hauptman is focused on reducing tailpipe pollution and its impact on the thousands of children who, like her 10-year-old son Oscar, struggle with asthma.

“This is a good step in the right direction and will help motivate passage of stronger bills and stronger standards,” she said. “Michigan is poised for this. We’re known for ... the Motor City. I can’t wait for us to be the Electric Motor City.”

<https://www.freep.com/story/money/cars/2021/08/05/joe-biden-clean-cars-dan-kildee-goldilocks/5505148001/>