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Some of those options, he said, might be "loophole-riddled" standards that give auto manufacturers more time to improve their fleets' performance.

But even if EPA throws its weight behind the highest reported standards, Becker said, that would fall short of what the International Council on Clean Transportation has said is possible: A rule encouraging as much as 75 percent of new U.S. car sales to be EVs by 2030.

Doing so would cut transportation emissions to the bone this decade, he said. And it would tee up the next clean car rule, which could then phase out the combustion engine for good, Becker said. That rule is likely to be final around 2029 for model years from 2032 to 2037. The world's scientists have said fossil fuels combustion must be retired worldwide by 2050 to keep catastrophic warming at bay. Passenger vehicles typically stay on the road for 10 to 15 years after purchase.

"If the goal is to have the last gas-guzzler roll off the assembly line in 2035, and you're discussing this in 2030, or 2032, then the auto industry is going to say, 'Oh, gosh, that's much too close to 2035, we can't possibly achieve that,'" he said.

"And why give them that argument? So you want the most aggressive improvements as soon as possible in the bank," he said. "So if, God forbid, another Trump is elected and tries to roll back standards, at least you've got some improvements happening."

Biden preps 'greatest single regulatory action' on climate

EPA is expected to offer more than one option for slashing tailpipe emissions.

By Jean Chemnick
April 11, 2023

GREENWIRE | EPA will roll out two rule rules Wednesday that just might mark the beginning of the end for U.S. gasoline-powered transportation, the source of 29 percent of the country's greenhouse gas emissions.

The package includes a regulatory proposal tightening passenger vehicles standards for model years 2027 to 2032 and another tackling emissions from heavy-duty trucks. The car rule is expected to be final early next year, and the truck rule could be complete before the end of 2023.

People who have discussed the proposals with EPA officials in recent weeks expect the clean car proposal to offer more than one option for tailpipe emissions standards.

The Clean Air Act doesn't authorize EPA to mandate a specific technology for lowering emissions. The law requires the agency to set a performance-based standard that automobile manufacturers must meet on average across their fleet and companies then choose how to meet that emissions target.

But the rule's stringency can point the industry toward a certain set of control technologies. Published reports say EPA is eyeing a standard that would encourage carmakers to make 67 percent of their fleets electric by 2032.

If the reports are correct, Margo Oge, a former EPA official and the architect of Obama administration tailpipe rules, said, "This is going to be the greatest single regulatory action that the Biden administration will take to combat climate change.

"It positions the county in a very good place to be competitive with China and the [European Union]," she said, noting that both have higher levels of electric vehicle penetration than the U.S., where EVs made up less than 6 percent of the total car market last year.

Oge added that such a rule would pay dividends in U.S.-based manufacturing — particularly when paired with incentives enacted as part of last year's climate spending law — and in terms of jobs and energy security.

That rule appears to up the ante on President Joe Biden's target — laid out in a 2021 executive order — that half of U.S. car sales in 2030 should be EVs.

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The agency could propose it as the preferred option or could "co-propose" several options without tipping its hand about which one is most likely to be embraced as part of next year's final rule.

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