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Strong Federal Auto Pollution Rules are Expected

The Environmental Protection Agency is widely expected to propose stringent auto pollution rules April 12. There could be strong automaker pushback if the rules are as tough as predicted. But the global march to EVs seems inevitable.

By Jim Motavalli
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According to an AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll last October, 62% of all voters think the federal government isn’t doing enough to fight climate change. Among under-45 voters, that number is 75%. The Biden administration is hoping to revise that perception with the release, on Wednesday, of what are expected to be the toughest-ever federal auto pollution standards.

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One sign that the new rules will be tough is a change in venue for the announcement, from Detroit to Washington, D.C. It seems likely that the American automakers would welcome the fuel-economy press conference in their backyard if they liked the outcome. There is likely to be determined carmaker lobbying to weaken the standards if they're as tough as predicted.

Because so many automakers have announced that they're converting to all-zero-emission-EVs by various dates, from 2030 to 2035, the [new rules can focus on increasing electric vehicle adoption](#) as part of a fleet-wide emissions-reduction goal, rather than simply citing a mile-per-gallon number. The bigger an automaker's EV output, the less it has to rely on cutting emissions from the gas burners still in its fleet.

The New York Times [said April 8](#), citing two sources "familiar with the matter," that the new rules will be strict, "designed to ensure that all-electric cars make up as much as 67 percent of new passenger vehicles sold in the country by 2032." The requirement would be introduced gradually, with 54 to 60% EVs by 2030, and 64 to 67% of new car sales by 2032.

Last year, only 5.8% of the new vehicles sold were battery EVs, so Biden is likely to be setting the country up for a rapid ramp-up.

The Biden Administration [finalized its rules for 2023 through 2026 in late 2021](#). Back then, the administration was projecting that sales of EVs and plug-in hybrids would increase from a 7% market share in 2023 to 17% in model year 2026. That increase, combined with a "wider uptake of advanced gasoline engine and vehicle technologies available today," would allow automakers to meet the standards.

Over the lifetime of a 2026 vehicle, a consumer would save more than \$1,000 compared to a car produced without the standards, EPA said. Cox Automotive said on April 10 that the U.S. will have a million EV sales in 2023, and that plug-in sales achieved a 7% market share in the first quarter of the year.

At the [New York International Auto Show](#), the two most significant debuts were of electrics – the [Kia EV9](#) (a Telluride-sized SUV) and the [Ram 1500 REV](#), a full-sized battery truck. The pivot to electrics is quite pronounced, but the automakers are still producing, and consumers are buying, a preponderance of large vehicles – SUVs and pickups – that get fairly poor fuel economy.

Any automakers not producing mostly EVs will face big headwinds in Europe, which has committed to phasing [out gas and diesel cars by 2035](#) (with a tiny loophole for e-fuel, gasoline produced in a carbon-neutral process using captured carbon dioxide and sustainably produced wind power).

Some automakers are offering hybrid and plug-in hybrid (PHEV) versions of their large vehicles, with both better fuel economy and some electric range. Auto buyers have to choose them, of course. "The EPA should look to California, whose state air regulators allow strong plug-in hybrid electric vehicles with 50 miles or more all-electric range to qualify under its recent rules, right along with battery and fuel cell EVs," said Zan Dubin-Scott, a spokeswoman for the [Strong](#)

[Plug In Hybrid Electric Vehicle Coalition](#), a group of veteran utility and academic electric transportation experts.

The EPA's proposed regulation will have to go through a public comment period before it is finalized, and could be altered – and possibly weakened – as part of that process.