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Trump caps EV assault with fuel economy repeal

The proposal is the latest aimed at slowing the transition away from gasoline-powered vehicles.

By Jean Chemnick, David Ferris
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President Donald Trump is close to erasing the entirety of a Biden-era plan to transition the country to electric vehicles.

On Wednesday, the president personally unveiled a Department of Transportation proposal to weaken fuel economy standards for cars and trucks. The plan would scrap rules that require cars to get 50.4 mpg by model year 2031, replacing them with standards that only require a fleetwide average fuel economy of 34.5 mpg.

The move caps a year of policy reversals aimed at eviscerating federal support for EVs. In June, Trump signed a joint resolution from Congress aimed at preventing California from implementing its rules to phase out gasoline-powered vehicles — though litigation continues over whether that is binding. In July, he signed a megalaw that scrapped incentives for EVs and eliminated long-standing fines for automakers that fail to comply with fuel economy standards.

EPA has also proposed — and will likely soon finalize — the elimination of climate pollution limits on cars and trucks.

Trump has kept some Biden-era artifacts in place, like tax credits for critical minerals, because they fit his agenda. But most of former President Joe Biden's landmark moves have been erased or modified in ways that slow the transition away from gasoline and toward battery-powered cars.

“This is a final plank in an across-the-board effort to reverse Biden-era policies on vehicles,” said Barry Rabe, a professor of environmental policy at the University of Michigan.

On Wednesday, Trump said his administration's suite of regulatory rollbacks were working in tandem with his tariff policies to resuscitate American auto manufacturing.

"We're bringing automobiles back, and the manufacturing of automobiles back into this country," he said.

Trump also said he had "revoked Biden's emissions waiver for California, so that California communists could not regulate the automobile industry and ruin the entire nation of automobiles." And he described auto executives — some of whom were in attendance — as pleading for the regulatory rollback.

"I've never had a group of people come to me more, more powerfully — and really just devastated that they had to do it, it was killing them — than the automobile manufacturers. The tailpipe emission standards," he said.

'Durable neutering' of CAFE standards

A big portion of Biden's EV policy was removed as part of the Republican megabill that became law last summer. The biggest change was to end the \$7,500 tax credit for EV purchases. When it was discontinued in September, sales of EVs plummeted.

Trump has also taken actions against the National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure program, a \$5 billion effort to build EV charging stations. His administration froze the program but ended up just modifying it in the face of a lawsuit by Democrat-run states.

Trump has chosen to leave some parts of Biden's plans in place, like a tax credit for critical minerals that not only helps battery producers but also industries the president favors, like the semiconductor and defense sectors. He has terminated some EV-related federal grants but left many others untouched.

This summer's Republican megalaw took the teeth out of Biden's fuel economy rules. A provision removed decades-old penalties for auto manufacturers that failed to meet the Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards — and credits for manufacturers that outperformed them.

Albert Gore, executive director of the Zero Emission Transportation Association, said that provision in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act meant Wednesday's action would have limited immediate impact.

"As far as near-term effect, I think this rulemaking has virtually none," he said. "But it's certainly a more durable neutering of the CAFE standard than the zeroing out of the civil penalties and reconciliation was because that, of course, can be changed back in a future reconciliation bill or in a bipartisan bill."

If DOT finalizes new CAFE rules through model year 2031, a subsequent administration would have to undertake a new rulemaking process to revise them.

Trump, the auto manufacturers and Republican members of the House and Senate who spoke Wednesday said the proposal would save companies and consumers money and allow auto dealers to tailor offerings to customer preference.

"We believe that people should be able to make a choice, as you said, Mr. President, and we will invest more in affordable vehicles," said Ford CEO Jim

Farley, whom Trump singled out as having advocated especially hard for the standards' repeal.

Detroit's "Big Three" auto manufacturers — Ford, Stellantis and GM — all released very similarly worded statements welcoming the draft repeal and replacement for bringing CAFE standards into better "alignment" with market realities or conditions.

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