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Historic Climate Rollback Makes U.S. a Global Outlier on Tailpipe Rules

The E.P.A.'s killing of the "endangerment finding" caps a year of deregulation that is likely to make cars thirstier for gas and less competitive globally, experts say.

By Hiroko Tabuchi
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The momentous end to the federal government's legal authority to fight climate change makes it official.

The United States will essentially have no laws on the books that enforce how efficient America's passenger cars and trucks should be.

That's the practical result of the Trump administration's yearlong parade of regulatory rollbacks, capped on Thursday by its killing of the "endangerment finding," the scientific determination that required the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate greenhouse gases because of the threat to human health.

"The U.S. no longer has emission standards of any meaning," said Margo T. Oge, who served as the E.P.A.'s top vehicle emissions regulator under three presidents and has since advised both automakers and environmental groups.

"Nothing. Zero," she added. "Not many countries have zero."

Transportation is the largest single source of greenhouse gases in the United States.

Car buyers could still vote with their wallets, demanding more fuel-efficient cars. California has vowed to sue to maintain stricter standards. The Department of Transportation still regulates fuel economy under rules meant to conserve oil, and the E.P.A. still regulates other tailpipe emissions, like nitrogen oxides, that harm human health.

But last year, the Trump administration proposed [weakening the fuel economy standards](#) to largely irrelevant levels. The Republican-controlled Congress also [set civil penalties for violations at \\$0](#), essentially making them voluntary for automakers. In addition, Congress last year [blocked California's clean-car rules](#).

The bottom line is that the United States is set to stand apart from a majority of the world's industrialized nations, which have mandatory fuel economy or greenhouse gas tailpipe emissions rules.

The Biden administration had sought to tighten limits on emissions to encourage automakers to sell more nonpolluting electric vehicles.

An E.P.A. official reiterated that elimination of the endangerment finding applied only to greenhouse gas emissions. She said the E.P.A. in the current administration was committed to protecting human health and the environment while boosting the economy. She said the agency had calculated that killing the endangerment finding would result in more than \$1.3 trillion in savings, most from the reduced costs for new vehicles.

The Trump administration's elimination of the endangerment finding on Thursday is expected to face fierce legal challenges from environmental groups and others. The endangerment finding was a 2009 scientific conclusion that greenhouse gas emissions pose a danger to Americans' health and welfare. It provided the foundation to justify federal regulations that limit carbon dioxide, methane and other pollution, including from cars.

If the E.P.A.'s decision holds, it could increase the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 10 percent over the next 30 years, according to the Environmental Defense Fund, an advocacy group.

Greenhouse emissions are the main driver of global climate change, which in turn is intensifying heat waves, drought, hurricanes and floods while also melting glaciers, causing sea levels to rise.

Lee Zeldin, the E.P.A. administrator, called the end of the finding “the single largest deregulatory action in the history of the United States.” He accused Democrats of having launched an “ideological crusade” on climate change that had “strangled entire sectors of the United States economy,” particularly the auto industry, which has struggled to sell electric vehicles.

Climate concerns aside, it’s unclear whether the U.S. auto industry will ultimately benefit from the elimination of emissions and fuel efficiency regulations. The move could leave American automakers even more dominated by gas-guzzling trucks and sport utility vehicles, experts said, as China and other nations continue to shift toward cleaner electric cars.

That could leave them at a competitive disadvantage in coming years. “Our automakers are not going to survive,” Ms. Oge predicted.

John Bozzella, the president of the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, which represents automakers in the United States, has declined to say whether he supports the end of the endangerment finding. But he said in a statement that the move would “correct some of the unachievable emissions regulations enacted under the previous administration.”

Mr. Trump has swung back and forth on his opinion of electric vehicles. During the 2024 presidential campaign, he said electric cars would “kill” America’s auto industry. But he appeared to at least temporarily soften his stance at the urging of Elon Musk, the chief executive of Tesla and his one-time close adviser. In March, he [said he would buy a Tesla](#).

“Globally, the push is in exactly the opposite direction, in the direction of electrifying vehicles,” said Ann Carlson, a professor at U.C.L.A. School of Law who served under President Joseph R. Biden Jr. as acting administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Transportation Department agency that sets fuel efficiency standards.

But now, “they’re saying no standards whatsoever,” she said.

For 17 years, the E.P.A. worked in tandem with the Department of Transportation, with the E.P.A. regulating carbon dioxide emissions (to protect health) and the Transportation Department governing how much fuel a car can burn (to conserve fuel).

The endangerment finding had allowed the E.P.A. in recent years to push standards more aggressively than possible using fuel-economy rules alone, setting targets so low they would eventually have become virtually impossible for gasoline engines to meet. The E.P.A. also had the authority, for example, to issue stop-sale orders if an automaker failed to meet standards, preventing them from selling certain cars until the issue was resolved.

The first Trump administration had moved to weaken both the tailpipe emissions and fuel economy standards. Mr. Biden had then reversed course, strengthening them. But now that the second Trump administration has eliminated the E.P.A.'s underlying authority to regulate greenhouse gases, another reversal by a future administration could be more difficult.

“Even if a new administration came in and was inclined to regulate greenhouse gasses, it would take years to reissue and defend the endangerment finding,” Professor Carlson said. “And in the meantime, they would have no authority to write any new greenhouse gas regulations.”

The remaining rules, such as the fuel efficiency requirements, could also be weakened. In December, the Trump administration proposed resetting the Transportation Department standard to require automakers to achieve an average of 34.5 miles per gallon for the full lineup of cars they sell by 2031. The Biden-era target was closer to 50 miles per gallon.

Those new standards would be less stringent than those in the European Union, as well as those of countries like China, Japan and India. Congress's separate decision to eliminate fines for failure to comply with efficiency standards also makes the rules voluntary, saving automakers significant compliance costs.

Any resulting shift by American automakers toward gas guzzlers that can't be sold in Europe or China could further isolate the U.S. market. And the United States

would increasingly cede the future of automotive technology to Chinese electric vehicle giants like BYD, experts said.

“We’re an outlier now,” said Joshua Linn, a professor at the University of Maryland who studies environmental policies and the transportation sector. “Those larger trucks and S.U.V.s tend to make them more money,” he said. “But if they want to compete in Europe or East Asia, they really need to be able to produce these E.V.s.”

A divergence in tailpipe emissions rules could emerge domestically. California has promised a court challenge, saying the state would fight to continue to regulate greenhouse gases. Other states are expected to follow California’s lead.

“To have a patchwork of systems makes it really hard for companies that do business in 50 states,” let alone in other countries, said Anne L. Kelly, the vice president of government relations at Ceres, an advocacy group that works with businesses on their sustainability plans. “There is no world in which this is helpful for the auto industry.”

Matthew Beecham, a senior research analyst at S&P Global Mobility, an automotive company, said that given the uncertainties, automakers were likely to hedge their bets. They might expand their gasoline car lineups, he said, but most likely would not abandon electrification completely.

And despite no penalties for violating the remaining fuel economy standards, there was unlikely to be “wholesale lawbreaking,” he said, because state rules and investor scrutiny could keep companies in check. “Expect tactical shifts toward profitable trucks, not open defiance,” he added.

Still, a shift toward larger gasoline models could ultimately undermine their competitiveness in an intensifying global E.V. race. Carmakers around the world are scrambling to secure enough E.V. batteries, for example, and that race penalizes laggards, he said.

While the E.P.A. continues to regulate pollutants like nitrogen oxides that pose direct threats to human health, it is now also seeking to weaken those rules.

Aaron Szabo, the E.P.A.'s air quality chief, wrote [in an opinion article published by The Hill](#) in December that rolling back those rules would “reduce red tape and bring common sense back to rulemaking.” The move to roll back regulations increases choice and lowers the price of cars, he said.

But vehicles that burn more fuel cost car owners more at the pump, said Daniel Becker, the director of the Safe Climate Transport Campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group, in addition to the costs to the climate, public health and industrial competitiveness.

The Trump administration “is telling American manufacturers, ‘You guys go build gasoline cars again,’” he said. “The Chinese government is telling its manufacturers, ‘You go build the advanced vehicles that are going take over the world.’”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/16/climate/endangerment-finding-auto-emissions-regulations.html>