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Trump Moves to End Standalone Big-Rig Engine Fuel-Economy Rules

The administration says regulators exceeded their authority by setting efficiency standards for truck engines separately from the vehicles they power.

By Jim Motavalli
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Continuing its deregulatory efforts, the Trump administration on August 28—claiming the Obama-era Department of Transportation exceeded its authority—announced its intention to stop regulating the fuel economy of stand-alone engines.

According to the interpretive rule, the government's authority to set fuel-economy standards extends only to whole vehicles, not their component parts. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Administrator Jonathan Morrison said in a statement, "The Trump administration is getting out of the way so manufacturers can decide how they want to meet fuel-efficiency requirements… American innovators—not big government—know how best to design vehicle engines."

On background, NHTSA told *Autoweek* that its action has precedents, including a federal appellate court ruling that struck down the agency's trailer standards because, well, trailers aren't vehicles. NHTSA also said that its new interpretation is unrelated to President Trump injecting himself into big-rig politics, including pardoning a man who was convicted of removing catalytic converters from hundreds of large trucks.

In June, Trump issued a memo asking the Environmental Protection Agency to make an end run around the California Air Resources Board (which certifies aftermarket parts for that state) and let the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA), an industry group, approve parts for sale. The EPA acted quickly to turn the memo into law, giving SEMA approval power for parts in 49 states (excepting California). A spokesman for SEMA, asked about the latest Trump administration ruling, said, "This issue isn't really our fight."

Under Obama and Biden, NHTSA argued that the Energy Independence and Security Act (EISA) of 2007 gave it broad authority to monitor truck engine

performance separately from regulation of the whole vehicle. Trump's DOT has now reversed that ruling.

Industry groups such as the Truck and Engine Manufacturers Association (EMA) have claimed that manufacturers need engineering flexibility to reach targets by improving aerodynamics, weight reduction, tire use, and transmission tuning, rather than simply measuring the engine's economy.

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EMA applauded the NHTSA action and said it would work with the agency to develop a final rule that reflects "real-world customer adoption of fuel-saving technologies, deliver meaningful operational and economic benefits to customers, and provide manufacturers the flexibility to develop engines and vehicles that meet the diverse demands of the commercial vehicle market. Without modification, the current engine and vehicle standards will considerably restrict engine and vehicle specification choices of our customers."

The fuel efficiency of America's truck fleet has not exactly been improving by leaps and bounds. In 2023, according to the North American Council for Freight Efficiency, the average on-the-road performance of big fleets was 7.77 miles per gallon, a 2 percent improvement over the 7.62 mpg from 2022. In 2013, the average was 6.67 mpg.

European big rig performance has not historically been hugely better, but EU regulations targeting emissions reduction have led to some ongoing improvement. The EU is intent on switching over to battery trucks, but manufacturers complain

that they've provided the vehicles but the EU hasn't delivered the necessary infrastructure.

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David Pettit, a senior attorney at CBD, added that NHTSA "seems to be signaling" that truck makers shouldn't have to worry about stronger regulations after 2027, or about enforcement of existing regs. "It's another step backward by the Trump Administration, toward dirtier air and more public health problems," he said.

Also slated for revision are the rules governing big-rig emissions controls. In July, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which monitors big rigs to existing emission standards on pollutants such as nitrogen oxides (NOx) and hydrocarbons (HC), proposed amendments that would weaken requirements on the use of smog-reducing diesel exhaust fluid (DEF). It also announced plans to scale back engine emissions warranty periods and delay stricter "useful life" requirements, which spell out how long trucks have to meet clean-air and pollution standards before they're free of compliance penalties.

Truckers hate the “inducements” that kick in and put their vehicles into limp (or “derate”) mode when faulty pollution controls (such as low DEF levels) are not fixed after a period of time.

Dave Cook, senior vehicles analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said that attempts to weaken big-truck pollution standards “are the result of heavy lobbying by special interest groups” including independent truck and bus driver associations, trucking fleets, and truck manufacturers. Cook detailed the many ways the administration is attempting to weaken pollution controls on large diesel trucks.

On August 31, a coalition of the larger environmental groups issued a call to stop attempts to weaken environmental rules on big trucks, which it said are a small fraction of vehicles on the road but a big contributor to asthma cases, bronchitis, heart attacks, and strokes. “The Trump EPA is choosing polluters over people by weakening life-saving protections for heavy-duty trucks,” said Katherine Garcia, director of Sierra Club’s Clean Transportation for All campaign. “Communities living near highways, freight routes, and warehouses breathe in higher levels of dangerous truck pollution and face the health consequences that come with it.”

The administration’s interpretive rule on engines establishes a legal foundation for a forthcoming notice-and-comment rulemaking that would officially reset the medium-and heavy-duty program in the code of federal regulations. It’s not likely that the rules will end up stronger, critics say.

https://www.autoweek.com/news/a73610323/trump-to-end-standalone-big-rig-engine-fuel-economy-rules/