

Trump rollback of mileage standards guts climate change push (Update)

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This Dec. 12, 2018, file photo shows traffic on the Hollywood Freeway in Los Angeles. The Trump administration is rolling back tough Obama-era mileage standards and gutting one of the United States' biggest efforts to slow climate change. The administration released its relaxed mileage rules Tuesday. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)

The Trump administration's rollback of mileage standards Tuesday marks a win for Americans who like their SUVs and pickup trucks, but the government's own estimates show big costs, too—more Americans dying from air pollution, more climate-damaging tailpipe exhaust and more expense for drivers at the gas pumps.

The administration's final rule relaxes future mileage standards for years to come, gutting tougher Obama-era standards that were the U.S. government's single most forceful initiative against climate-changing fossil fuel emissions.

"Great news! American families will now be able to buy safer, more affordable, and environmentally friendly cars with our new SAFE VEHICLES RULE," President Donald Trump declared in a tweet. "Get rid of those old, unsafe clunkers. Build better and safer American cars and create American jobs. Buy American!"

But Democratic lawmakers and environmental groups condemn the rollback, and years of legal battles are expected, including from California and other states opposed to the rollback.

The rollback drew rare public criticism from former President Barack Obama, who largely has remained silent as his successor targets public health, environment and climate regulations from Obama's time as part of the current administration's regulation-cutting drive.

"We've seen all too terribly the consequences of those who denied warnings of a pandemic. We can't afford any more consequences of climate denial," Obama tweeted after Trump's transportation and Environmental Protection Agency heads made the final rule public.

Obama also ventured into this year's presidential campaign with the mileage rollback, telling Americans to ""vote this fall."" His vice

president, Joe Biden, is the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Trump's new mileage standards will require automakers to achieve 1.5% annual increases in fuel efficiency. That's less than the more than 2% increases the U.S. auto industry is already averaging.

John Bozzella, CEO of the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, a trade group representing automakers, said the industry still wants middle ground between the two standards, and it supports year-over-year mileage increases. But he says the Obama-era standards are outdated because of the drastic shift to trucks and SUVs.

Trump initially proposed simply dropping mandates for more fuel efficiency entirely, but he compromised after California and a dozen other states and a faction of automakers revolted, and after Trump federal officials had difficulty coming up with justifying arguments.

The compromise "strikes the right regulatory balance that protects our environment, and sets reasonable targets for the auto industry," EPA chief Andrew Wheeler said. "This rule supports our economy, and the safety of American families."

James Owens, acting administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said automakers still can sell electric powered and other more efficient vehicles. But he said the rule will ensure that more people can buy new vehicles.

Almost the entire premise of the rollback is that car prices would drop an average of \$1,000 because automakers would spend less on fuel-efficiency technology. "These are dollars that are coming out of consumers' pockets, out of families' pockets," Owens said.

Industry analysts, however, say \$1,000 won't mean much to the buyer of an average new vehicle, which cost just under \$38,000 in March.

Akmal Mujeeb, owner of Longhorn Sport Imports, a used-vehicle dealer near Austin, Texas, agreed Tuesday.

"My honest answer is it's going to be marginal if anything," said Mujeeb, who sold new vehicles before starting his own business. "It's not going to make any difference in sales."

The administration also argues that cheaper cars would prompt Americans to buy new vehicles with new safety technology, saving 3,300 lives on U.S. roadways through 2029.

But experts dispute that claim, saying many of the vehicles traded in over the next eight years will be 4 and 5 years old, and there isn't much safety difference between those and new vehicles.

David Friedman, vice president of advocacy for Consumer Reports, said the government also is assuming that because the vehicles' mileage won't be as good, people will drive less and be exposed to less risk on the road. He says that assumption is flawed.

And opponents say dirtier air from the rollback will kill and injure more people than the rollback claims to save in roadway accidents.

Drawing on the government's projections, the Environmental Defense Fund advocacy group projects 18,500 additional deaths from respiratory problems and other illnesses by mid-century, along with more illnesses and lost work days.

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, resident Elizabeth Hauptman—a member of Moms Clean Air Force, a public health advocacy group—said the

rollbacks would mean more soccer games cut short and fewer summer barbecues for her son, a 9-year-old with asthma.

"He's going to miss more events," said Hauptman, who keeps the boy inside whenever air pollution readings are high, rather than risk another asthma attack away from home. "They look to you for help, and you just pray you get home in time to use your nebulizer."

Opponents also project millions of tons more carbon dioxide and other climate damaging emissions, compared to the Obama mileage standards.

The transportation sector, including autos, is the country's biggest source of fossil fuel emissions. Scientists in and out of the U.S. government during Trump's term have urged rapid cuts in fossil fuel emissions to stave off the worst of climate change. Trump frequently mocks the science behind climate change warnings, and he has ignored the warnings.

"The only winner from this action is the oil industry, which wants us stuck driving dirty gas guzzlers as long as possible," said Gina McCarthy, Obama's former EPA chief, now head of the Natural Resources Defense Council advocacy group.

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