Questions and answers about US fuel economy standards

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In this Thursday, July 16, 2015, photo, a customer re-fuels her car at a Costco in Robinson Township, Pa. The U.S. government says the fuel economy of the nation's fleet of cars and trucks likely won't meet its targets in 2025 because low gas prices have changed the types of vehicles people are buying. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

The U.S. government has issued a report on fuel economy and greenhouse gas standards for U.S. cars and trucks that were first established in 2012. The report Monday kicked off a two-year review process leading to a government decision on whether to leave the standards in place through 2025 or change them.

A look at the standards:

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WHAT ARE CAFE AND GHG STANDARDS?

CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) and GHG (greenhouse gas) standards are mile-per-gallon and emissions targets for cars and trucks set by the U.S. government. The standards are based on size and are weighted by sales. Each manufacturer has a different requirement based on the models it sells.

Congress required CAFE standards in 1975 after several years of gasoline shortages during the Arab oil embargo. The standard for passenger cars stayed at 27.5 mpg from 1990 until 2007, when Congress required substantial increases in fuel economy. At the same time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency began regulating greenhouse gas emissions. In 2009, the government set a standard of 34.1 mpg for cars and light trucks by 2016. In 2012, the government set a new target of 54.5 mpg by 2025.

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DOES THAT MEAN MY CAR COULD GET 54.5 MPG IN 2025?

No. That figure comes from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is based on the fuel economy needed to achieve greenhouse gas reductions. Manufacturers can apply credits for various technologies to arrive at that figure. Real-world mileage is likely to be around 40 mpg.

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WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

The government must decide whether the proposed standards for 2025 should stay in place or should be modified. When the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency set the new standards in 2012, they agreed to conduct a mid-term evaluation for model years 2022-2025. That evaluation begins with the draft technical assessment, which was released Monday, and is expected to end in 2018 with a decision on whether the CAFE standards should be modified.

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WHAT DID THE DRAFT TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT SAY?

The draft doesn't recommend whether to change fuel economy and emissions requirements. That will come later. It says automakers are well on their way toward meeting the 2012 standards, but it also says those standards might have to be lowered, since low gas prices have changed the mix of vehicles that automakers sell. More people are buying trucks and SUVs—and spurning small, fuel-efficient cars—now that gas prices are low.

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WHY WOULD THE GOVERNMENT CONSIDER CHANGING THE STANDARDS?

Gas is more than $1 per gallon cheaper than it was in 2012, when the standards were issued, which has hurt demand for more fuel-efficient cars. If automakers can't sell those cars, then they can't apply their high mileage toward their corporate average. But environmentalists and others say automakers are already beating the targets in many cases, so the government shouldn't weaken them. They also say automakers have been pushing SUVs because they are more profitable than cars.

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HOW ARE AUTOMAKERS IMPROVING THEIR FUEL ECONOMY?

The standards give manufacturers extra credit for new technologies, such as hybrid engines for pickup trucks and stop-start systems, which automatically shut off the engine when the vehicle stops. They also get greenhouse gas credits for more efficient air-conditioning systems. Manufacturers are raising their fuel economy with the introduction of electric cars like the Chevrolet Bolt, which is due out later this year, and the increased use of lightweight materials like aluminum and high-strength steel. Engine technologies, such as direct fuel injection, and more efficient transmissions are also contributing.

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DO THOSE ADDED TECHNOLOGIES MAKE MY VEHICLE MORE EXPENSIVE?

Yes. In the report issued Monday, the EPA estimates the fuel economy standards will cost $1,017 per vehicle between the 2022 and 2025 model years, while NHTSA estimates they will cost up to $1,245 per vehicle. The agencies differ on how much consumers would save in gas, but they estimate it's between $680 and $1,620 per vehicle.

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