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Trump administration axes Obama-era clean car standards

The Trump administration announced Monday it was rolling back Obama-era climate rules for cars and passenger trucks. The move, pushed by major automakers, formally reopens greenhouse gas standards for vehicles to be built from 2022 through 2025.

The announcement is the latest in a series of efforts aimed at gutting environmental regulations, particularly related to climate change. Following Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, the Environmental Protection Agency initiated last October the repeal of climate rules for power plants, known as the Clean Power Plan.

The power generation and transportation sectors are the two largest sources of carbon dioxide emissions in the country, emitting an estimated 56 percent of the nation's inventory. The primary measures to control greenhouse gas emissions in both sectors are now undergoing repeal. The Trump administration has also moved to weaken or eliminate a wide range of environmental restrictions on oil and gas drilling and other heavily-polluting industries.

Accompanying the deregulation efforts are attacks on environmental science. EPA chief Scott Pruitt, echoing his boss in the White House, continues to downplay or outright deny humanity's primary role in climate change. EPA public affairs officials last week instructed staff to parrot the misleading line that "the ability to measure with precision the degree and extent" of human impact on climate change is "subject to continuing debate," and "clear gaps remain including our understanding of the role of human activity" in climate change.

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Earlier in the week Pruitt proposed a policy change to block the agency's ability to consider a substantial portion of relevant public health research in its rule-making, citing supposed lack of transparency as a pretext. Omitting research that does not make public its raw data, typically on account of confidential medical information of study participants, would make it easier for the agency to roll back science-based standards.

In the midst of these regulatory and scientific battles, Pruitt has also been engulfed in a series of corruption scandals which now threaten his future at the EPA. The latest blatant conflict of interest involves renting a below market Capitol Hill condominium on favorable terms from an energy and environment lobbyist, whose client received approval from the EPA for a natural gas pipeline in March 2017.

Monday's announcement by Pruitt was an aggressive assertion of Trump's deregulatory agenda, one that may not stop at gutting federal rules but also attempt to block California's ability to set their own regulations on vehicle emissions. Under a 2012 agreement, both the federal and California state programs were harmonized, subject to a mid-term review first completed by the Obama administration last year, now reopened as of Monday. In the 2012 deal, manufacturers accepted regular improvements to fuel efficiency of new vehicles incrementally through 2025, while the harmonization allowed them to produce a single version of each vehicle that could be sold anywhere in the country.

Pruitt put California on notice that the EPA is reconsidering the state's authorization, in effect attempting to maintain harmonization but at a less stringent level. "Cooperative federalism doesn't mean that one state can dictate standards for the rest of the country," Pruitt said in a press statement. California promised to "vigorously defend" its own rules, threatening a prolonged legal battle if the EPA moves forward with revoking their waiver.

In attacking the vehicle greenhouse gas standards, the Trump administration is targeting one of president Obama's "signature" environmental initiatives. Obama touted the supposedly ambitious target of 54.5 miles per gallon average fuel economy for vehicles in 2025 as evidence the administration was serious about addressing climate change. In reality, the 54.5 mpg figure is little more than a public relations fabrication, connected to an out-of-date methodology no longer used by the EPA that inflates fuel economy figures by 30 percent.

The rules were never tied to what is actually needed to address transportation's role in climate change. Transportation currently accounts for 27 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the US, soon to become the largest source of carbon pollution of any sector. Vehicle emissions remain at levels 16 percent above 1990 and have remained flat since

2010. Electricity and other alternative fuel sources power less than one percent of the current fleet of cars and trucks.

The regulations already provide so much flexibility that manufacturers have over-complied with fuel economy standards to date, accumulating significant amounts of credits which they can expend rather than building otherwise more efficient vehicles. Separate standards apply for each size of vehicle, allowing auto companies to shift freely to producing larger, more inefficient vehicles when the opportunity arises. This change has been stark since 2012, when the current standards were initially finalized. The share of trucks manufactured rose to 45 percent in 2016 compared to 36 percent four years earlier. Over the same period the national fleet average rose by just 0.9 miles per gallon.

The EPA's 1,200 page technical assessment report completed in 2016 documented a variety of gasoline engine technologies that already exist to meet the 2025 standards at lower costs than originally predicted. Even with lower gasoline prices, the fuel savings over the lifetime of the vehicles far outweigh the additional manufacture cost. A quarter of vehicles in 2017 already include enough technology to meet 2020 standards. If anything, the technical basis demonstrates that the 2022-2025 standards were overly weak.

Nevertheless, Pruitt justified the rollback by claiming that changes in gasoline price assumptions and "consumer acceptance" of fuel efficient vehicles since last year have rendered the previous analysis invalid. The irrational swings in the price of gasoline are the pretext for dismantling controls on carbon pollution.

The EPA has not indicated whether it will merely weaken or completely revoke the greenhouse gas vehicle standards. Automakers are in fact are mixed, with some arguing only for added "flexibility" rather than sharply lower targets. Others prefer a more drastic rollback of vehicle regulations.

The Trump administration is acting on behalf of a significant section of the ruling class, which is bitterly opposed even the most modest environmental regulations which may impact record profits. However, no section, whether represented by Democrats or Republicans, is able to effectively act to ensure the social wellbeing and public health in the face of threats like climate change.