



Regulating the Automobile

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Since its invention, the automobile has transformed the American landscape and has served as the embodiment of the American dream. However emissions from these automobiles have begun to transform the planet's climate. Along with growing evidence gathering on the impact of car emissions on the local and global environment, high gas prices [lawmakers in 10 states](#) have embraced California's stricter emissions standards. This simple regulation, would put the US back on the path to ever greater fuel efficiency standards, which has remained pretty much flat since the late 1980s, when Minivans and SUVs became popular.

While many people complain about high gas prices, global warming remains the primary stated reason for pushing for greater fuel efficiency:

"The two biggest contributors to global warming are power plants and motor vehicles," said David Doniger, a senior lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "If you deal with them, you deal with more than two-thirds of the problem."

But automakers contend that the regulations will limit the availability of many sport utility vehicles, pickup trucks, vans and larger sedans, since they will effectively require huge leaps in gas mileage to rein in emissions. The industry also says the rules will force them to curb sales of more-powerful engines in the state, and ultimately harm consumers by increasing the cost of vehicles.

Typically, even though many US automakers are facing declining sales of their high margin SUVs they still just can't seem to make the transition to smaller, more efficient and lower emission cars. New York, the largest of the 10 other states, is facing automaker lawsuits and even some laughable arguments in light of all their talk about the ability of technology to solve problems.

In New York, automakers also plan to argue that the regulations were not vetted as thoroughly as the state's laws require. And they will contend that the standards will actually harm the environment by leading to what Ms. Bergquist called "the jalopy effect" because higher initial car prices will discourage people from trading in older models that pollute more than newer ones. "Less efficient autos will stay on the road longer, and that will increase smog-forming pollutants," she said.

That's not the can-do attitude expressed in their advertising:

The legal battles do come at an awkward time. After years of saying that customers cared little about gas mileage, automakers are rushing to assert their green credentials as oil prices have risen. G.M. and Ford have been particularly scarred by the sales

slump of their large sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks.

In a recent advertisement that has appeared in The New York Times and in many other publications, Ford's chairman and chief executive, William Clay Ford Jr., promoted his company's plan to sell 250,000 vehicles next year that can run on a corn-based ethanol blend instead of on gasoline, and 250,000 hybrid vehicles annually by 2010.

"Innovation is our mission," the advertisement said, adding that the company was building "smarter, safer, more fuel-efficient vehicles."

So it seems that this new regulatory block will need to push the US auto-industry kicking and screaming into the 21st Century, paying their lawyers what they should be investing in new technology or even simply applying off the shelf technology.

"They said that seat belts would put them out of business; they said that air bags would put them out of business; they said fuel economy and emissions regulations would all put them out of business," said David Friedman, a senior analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

"It turns out it's their unwillingness to innovate that's putting them out of business right now," he added, referring to the current struggles of General Motors and Ford Motor Company.

I just hope the Courts, the President and Congress don't prop up the Airline, Auto and Aerospace industries with enormous subsidies. Oh wait,

- the courts are letting the Airlines and autopart makers disown all the contracts they signed with their current and retired workers, thus allowing them to sell their goods at cost
- the recent energy and transportation bills were chock full of pork for all the fossil fuel industries including the roads and airports they use.

Maybe eventually politicians will start to listen to consumers instead of industry about wanting more fuel efficient vehicles?



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