

Automakers signal support for Biden's electric-vehicle vision

Companies that once pushed Trump to loosen Obama-era standards now embrace the idea of an emissions-free future

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Just weeks into Joe Biden's presidency, some of the same automobile companies that once pushed Donald Trump to loosen Obama-era fuel economy standards are now lining up to embrace the idea of an emissions-free future.

GM announced Jan. 28 that it plans to be carbon neutral by 2040 and has "an aspiration" to eliminate tailpipe emissions from new light-duty vehicles by 2035. And last week the Coalition for Sustainable Automotive Regulation, a group of automobile manufacturers and dealer groups including Mazda, Mitsubishi, Subaru, Toyota and National Automobile Dealers Association announced it will drop its support for the Trump administration's rollback of greenhouse gas emissions regulations.

The Alliance for Automotive Innovation, the key industry group, announced last week that it's committed to meeting the Biden administration's goals to achieve net-zero carbon emissions in transportation.

The industry plans to invest \$250 billion in vehicle electrification by 2023, according to the Alliance, and has asked the Biden administration to endorse a fuel efficiency standard roughly midway between the current standards and those of the former Obama Administration.

[\[EPA nominee Regan says environmental progress is good for jobs\]](#)

Electric vehicle company Tesla's market value is more than General Motors' and Ford combined. Global demand for electric vehicles is up, with China forecasting that electric, plug-in hybrid and hydrogen-powered vehicles will rise to 20 percent of its overall new car sales by 2025, up from the current 5 percent. Add to that Biden, who has made the fight against climate change a theme of nearly every department in his administration, and "the writing's on the wall," said Adie Tomer, head of the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative.

"The fact of the matter is, wildfires have gotten worse, hurricanes have gotten worse," said Rep. [Debbie Dingell](#), D-Mich. "We've got some real problems."

Electric future

White House domestic climate change adviser Gina McCarthy told Reuters in an interview published last week that automakers "understand now that the future for them is electric vehicles" and has begun working on revising Trump's emission standards.

And House Democrats last week re-introduced the clean energy tax package that was tucked into last summer's roughly \$2 trillion House infrastructure bill. That bill includes tax breaks for electric vehicles — yet another incentive to purchase them.

GM often sided with the Trump administration in an attempt to roll back Obama's aggressive goal of reducing emissions by 5 percent a year. Obama's rules would've required manufacturers to sell passenger vehicles that averaged 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025.

At the urging of automakers, Trump relaxed the standards to about 40 miles per gallon, raising standards by about 1.5 percent a year through model year 2026.

Trump also fought with California, which struck a deal with five automakers - Ford, Honda, BMW, Volkswagen and Volvo — that would've committed to an average fuel economy of 51 miles per gallon by 2026. That's a looser standard than Obama sought, but far more strict than what Trump proposed. Ford, which is investing more than \$11.5 billion in electric vehicles through 2022, has set a goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. GM and other automakers joined Trump in fighting the California standard, but when Trump lost the election in November, GM abandoned a lawsuit aimed at keeping California from setting its own fuel economy and emissions standards.

"There's a pendulum here," said Brett Smith, director of technology for the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor, Mich. "And the pendulum swings back and forth depending on who's in office."

He said by vowing to clean up emissions, GM could make the argument that they deserve some flexibility in hitting the stringent-Obama era standards.

Critics, meanwhile, question whether GM's promise will lead to any meaningful action at all.

Publicity 'ploy'

Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Transport Campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity, suggested GM's announcement was little more than a ploy to get good publicity.

While the announcement committed to reducing emissions, he said, GM never vowed to stop producing internal-combustion engines. "They were very unclear about a number of things," he said, saying they'll likely use credits and offsets in order to meet their emissions goals, rather than abandoning making polluting cars altogether. "Basically, they're saying 'we have an aspiration.'"

GM, he said, "will only end up doing what is required by law to do despite whatever promises they make. They always have. It's up to Biden to decide how tough the standards are. And they need to be very tough."

He also sharply criticized the Alliance's suggestion of a fuel efficiency standard roughly midway between the current standards and those of the former Obama Administration, saying the industry negotiated the Obama standards in the first place.

"You reach a deal with them and then at the first opportunity they tear it up," he said.

Biden, who recently signed an executive order that would require U.S. government cars to be electric, has set a goal of making the country net-zero in carbon emissions. In order to do that, Becker said, he'd really have to start doing so by 2030 — most cars last 15 to 20 years on the road.

"Clearly electric is the future," Becker said. "The question, if it's up to Biden, is it a near term future, or a distant future?"

But Brookings's Tomer said even the automakers who stood with Trump in the fight to loosen emissions knew they would ultimately embrace electric vehicles.

Automakers, he said, "have beyond a decade-long product pipeline under development, and every single (automaker) is betting hard on electric vehicles.

"We can expect every single automaker to have these kinds of announcements in the coming years," he said.

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