



OTHER OPINIONS

Trump rolls back clean car standards as air quality worsens

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Cities in the San Joaquin Valley continue to land among the American Lung Association's top 10 most polluted communities in the country. Meanwhile, on Tuesday, the comment period closed on the Trump administration's plans to ratchet back federal emissions standards and eliminate California's authority to run its crucial car emissions programs. Although the administration has its eyes on greenhouse gas controls, what's at stake is California's ability to transition to low- and zero-emission vehicles, a transition essential to reducing the pollutants that threaten public health in California and elsewhere in the nation.

The federal government has the primary authority to set automobile pollution standards under the Clean Air Act. But Congress — recognizing California's serious air pollution challenges — stipulated that California is entitled to a "waiver" that lets the state set stricter standards, and which gives other states the option to follow California's standards. The Trump administration's proposal threatens to withdraw the 2013 waiver that authorized the current Clean Cars program.



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The Clean Cars program is critical to addressing ozone levels — or smog as it is more commonly labeled. Ozone is a significant public health hazard, contributing to asthma, cardiovascular problems, and premature death. Although California's air quality has improved since the Clean Air Act was enacted, air quality in many parts of the state remains poor. According to the American Lung Association's State of the Air 2018 report, the 14 cities with the highest ozone levels in the country are in California. Millions are impacted, including the 10 million in the

Los Angeles region, which tops the ALA's smoggiest cities list, as well as those living in the San Joaquin Valley, Sacramento and San Diego.

Developing clean cars is essential to addressing this pollution. According to the ALA, in California, 84 percent of the nitrogen oxide emissions that contribute to ozone come from transportation.

California's Clean Cars program takes a coordinated approach that seeks to simultaneously control the smog-causing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions that come from cars' internal combustion engine. The program sparks innovation — specifically, zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs). The ZEV requirements, created in California and followed by eight states representing almost one-third of the automobile market, have been a central driver for the auto industries' emerging electric technologies.

The Trump administration claims that California is not entitled to its waiver because it does not face “compelling and extraordinary circumstances,” which are necessary to receive the waiver. Let's leave climate concerns — raging wildfires, inundated beachfront communities, collapsing coastal bluffs — aside for the moment. When the state hosts the top 14 cities with the worst smog in the nation, affecting millions of people, how is that not compelling and extraordinary?

The Trump administration also claims that California's initiatives will be too expensive and too difficult to implement. For whom? On what time scale? For industry, alternative technology is the wave of the future. The ZEV requirements have already prompted manufacturers to develop new electric and hybrid car technologies. Transitioning to new technologies will entail costs, but the transition will be to a new and more sustainable auto industry, one that could serve a growing global market for electric vehicles. And for consumers, cost savings from fewer trips to the gas pump are expected to more than compensate for potentially higher purchase prices.

The Trump administration's proposed rollback of clean car standards undercuts initiatives critical to the health and well-being of people in California and the states following its lead. Nor will this effort do the auto industry any favors: by slowing the innovation necessary to succeed in the global transition away from the internal combustion engine, the administration's attempts to give a break to the U.S. auto industry in the short-term could well backfire in the long-run.

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