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Fla. drivers like mileage standards

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Wade Hopping, a Tallahassee-based lobbyist for the American Association of Automakers, is the last person who would be expected to support President Obama's new federal fuel-economy and greenhouse-gas standards, announced Tuesday.

But even automakers are in favor of federal regulations that would significantly increase fuel mileage in cars and trucks, although there remains doubt as to whether the new standards can be achieved by 2016, Obama's deadline.

Key provisions of new regulations

The United States' first coast-to-coast limit on emissions.

The nation's strictest efficiency standards, which rise to an average of 35.5 miles per gallon by 2016.

Automakers would be required to reduce emissions by 900 million metric tons, the equivalent of taking 177 million cars off the road.

Oil consumption would be reduced by about 1.8 billion barrels through 2016.

An end to states' individual efforts to strengthen environmental standards.

A cost increase of \$600 to \$1,300 for new cars in 2016, although consumers would expect to save more than that amount in gasoline.

Hopping believes this could be an opportunity for American cars to make a big comeback.

"One of the questions is how will American companies fare in this kind of new market,

and I think they'll do great," Hopping said. "I think all car manufacturers, if they handle this right, will move in a great step forward."

For Drew Martin, the conservation chair of the Sierra Club Loxahatchee Group, the standards - which will, for the first time, establish a nationwide regulation of greenhouse gases - are just what Florida needs as the climate changes.

"If we do something about how we manufacture our cars so that the global climate changes less, we would see the benefit of not having a severe drought like we have here in Palm Beach County," Martin said. "It's the same thing with hurricanes; there's a connection between the severity of hurricanes and carbon in the atmosphere."

Environmentalists had been fighting to make Florida the 15th state to adopt California's strict clean-air auto regulations, a proposal backed by Gov. Charlie Crist.

But earlier this month, the proposal was rejected by the legislature. Now, the new federal regulations give the environmentalists exactly what they were seeking.

"Florida is the most vulnerable state in the country to the effects of global warming," Eric Draper, a lobbyist for Audubon, said, referring to Florida's exposure to rising seas.

Although the federal regulations could put a strain on automakers, the companies say they will accept them.

Otherwise, automakers faced the prospect of having to create cars with different standards in various states.

"Had we gone by the California standard, Florida would have been the only state in the whole Southeast that had a different standard," said Ken Plante, a state lobbyist for Toyota. "We needed a good strong standard and we wanted it nationwide, although we're moving a little quicker than everyone wanted."

Federal guidelines initially called for new standards by 2020, but the Obama administration pushed it up four years.

Currently, all cars and trucks have to average 25 miles per gallon. By 2016, cars will have to average 39 and trucks 30.

Those figures account for the average of a certain fleet, meaning Toyota could have some vehicles under the average, as long as others in its fleet exceed the average.

Although Hopping is excited about the new cars and trucks he expects to hit the market, he worries that struggling U.S. auto companies will have difficulty meeting the deadline.

"They've got to invent these technologies, and they have to perfect them," Hopping said. "It's one thing to have a guy sitting in a room somewhere running an electric test car that

cost \$110,000. It's another thing to convert that to mass production technology and sell it for \$25,000."

The prices of cars and trucks are expected to go up by \$600 to \$1,300, money that would be recouped through savings in gasoline use.

Mark Chudy of Greenacres, who drives a Ford E-150 van, worries that trucks could lose power if the companies commit to more energy-efficient vehicles.

"To get the power to carry a heavy load, a truck needs a lot of gas," Chudy said.

Ron Book, a lobbyist for AutoNation in Fort Lauderdale, said the Obama administration is rushing to meet its goal.

"I think what Washington has to try to continue to understand is how bad things are in the manufacturing world and the economy," Book said. "2020 is a whole lot more realistic than 2016."

Regardless, the leaders of the major automakers were at the White House on Tuesday backing the new regulations.

Audubon's Draper believes it was a long time coming.

"I don't know why the American carmakers have not gotten in front of federal requirements to do this previously," he said.

"Consumers want cleaner cars, and cars that get better mileage."

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