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CAR RULES

Your clean cars questions, explained

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President Obama announced new fuel efficiency standards in May 2009 with auto industry leaders. Olivier Douliery/MCT/Newscom

You've probably heard the term "clean car rules." But do you know what it actually means?

Here are answers to some common questions about the climate rules for automobiles.

Where did the rules originate?

Former President Obama can reasonably claim credit for the rules. In May 2009, he announced the new regulations in the White House Rose Garden alongside the CEOs of major auto companies, including Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Co.

What was Obama's goal?

The former president aimed to get cars to travel 54.5 mpg by model year 2025. Accomplishing the goal, he said, would slash planet-warming pollution from cars while improving their efficiency.

Which federal agencies are involved?

The clean car rules are a joint endeavor between EPA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a division of the Department of Transportation. Each agency handles a different component.

NHTSA (pronounced "NIT-suh") is responsible for setting the fuel economy standards, which dictate how far cars can travel on a single tank of gasoline.

EPA is responsible for setting the vehicle greenhouse gas emissions standards, which dictate how much carbon dioxide cars can release from their tailpipes.

How is California involved?

Under Section 209 of the Clean Air Act, California can receive a waiver from EPA to set tougher greenhouse gas emissions standards for cars than those issued by the federal government.

Under Section 177 of the bedrock environmental law, other states can choose to adopt California's standards.

To date, 13 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the more protective standards, representing more than 40% of all cars sold in the country.

What is President Trump doing?

Trump wants to significantly weaken the Obama-era clean car rules. It's one of his most consequential rollbacks of climate regulations.

Under Trump, EPA and NHTSA are expected to mandate increasing fuel economy standards by around 1.5% annually. That's much less aggressive than the 5% annual increases mandated by Obama.

In addition, the two agencies have revoked California's Clean Air Act waiver, forcing states to follow the looser federal tailpipe emissions rules.

What does the auto industry think of Trump's rollback?

The auto industry is deeply divided, to say

Clean cars timeline

MAY 2009

President Obama announces the clean car standards in the White House Rose Garden.

AUGUST 2012

The Obama administration finalizes the clean car standards in a joint rulemaking between EPA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

JANUARY 2017

Four days after President Trump's inauguration, major automakers visit the White House and request a softening of the standards.

AUGUST 2018

Former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt announces that the Obama-era standards have been found "too high" and "not appropriate." EPA and NHTSA release a proposed rule calling for weakening the Obama-era standards and revoking California's Clean Air Act waiver.

JULY 2019

Four major automakers – Ford, Honda, BMW and Volkswagen — reach a voluntary agreement with California to improve fuel economy in the coming years.

AUGUST 2019

The Justice Department launches an antitrust investigation into the four automakers that sided with

the least.

In July, four major automakers reached a voluntary agreement with California air regulators to improve fuel economy in the coming years, regardless of the federal rollback ([Greenwire](#), July 25).

But in October, several other car companies — including General Motors and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV — intervened in clean cars litigation on behalf of the Trump administration ([Climatewire](#), Oct. 29).

What's the legal outlook for the rollback?

A coalition of states and environmental groups has already sued the Trump administration over its revocation of California's Clean Air Act waiver.

Among other things, the groups argue that revoking the waiver would be "arbitrary and capricious" under the Administrative Procedure Act.

Once the Trump administration finalizes the second portion of the rollback, which is expected to call for increasing fuel economy standards by 1.5% annually, more lawsuits are certain to follow.

The case could eventually make its way to the Supreme Court.

California.

SEPTEMBER 2019
The Trump administration formally revokes California's Clean Air Act waiver.

OCTOBER 2019
Several major automakers, including General Motors and Fiat Chrysler, intervene in a lawsuit over the waiver on behalf of the Trump administration.

NOVEMBER 2019
News breaks that the Trump administration plans to increase fuel economy standards by 1.5% each year, rather than the 5% annual increases mandated by Obama.

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