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A trade-off with benefits

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The Obama administration already has set a quicker pace for putting more fuel-efficient cars on the road, vehicles that go farther on a gallon of gas, emit fewer pollutants and reduce how often drivers have to tank up. Now it should follow through on the president's stated commitment to push auto manufacturers to adhere to even tougher standards by the year 2025.

You can't argue with the beneficial results: cleaner air, weaning our addiction to foreign oil and creating more technology jobs.

On Sept. 28, the White House, Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Transportation are expected to announce new fuel-efficiency standards for the auto industry. These standards, along with those for lower greenhouse-gas emissions, will give the industry clear direction and ample lead time to plan and move forward with technological development in a well-grounded regulatory environment over the next 14 years.

Though the announcement is more than two months off, the horse trading is under way now, and environmental advocates, consumer groups and the auto industry are all in there pitching now to make sure that their wants get all due consideration.

The administration appears to be moving away from its original intent for cars to be capable of getting an average of 60 miles per gallon by 2025. In addition, it was seeking a 6 percent reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions.

Now the administration is said to be putting 56 mpg and a 5 percent greenhouse-gas reduction on the table. This has some environmentalists concerned. However, in its first year in office, the Obama administration fast-tracked the fuel-efficiency standards, raising them to an average of 35.7 miles per gallon by 2016, bringing labor, environmentalists and the auto industry to the table first. So, 56 mpg by 2025 still is a commendable goal.

Auto manufacturers argue that fuel-efficiency standards that stringent will ratchet up the price of a new vehicle. They're right. But here's what they don't say: The more fuel efficient the car, the lower the fuel costs to consumers. In other words, there will be costs one way or the other. The added value of lower fuel consumption and fewer polluting emissions make a strong case for the strongest standards possible.

Car buyers, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, stand to save up to \$7,000 over the life of a vehicle that has a 56.2-mpg standard. And the Sierra Club says that polls find consumers would be willing to pay up to \$3,000 more for a more-fuel efficient car. Clearly, the driving public understands the trade-off - and the benefits.

The setting of fuel-efficiency and greenhouse-gas standards is more than just a numbers game. The administration also needs to ensure that auto manufacturers move toward achieving the standards in a consistent manner from the outset. Some in the auto industry are seeking to backload the new rules, pushing the government to give them a break in the early years, while promising to speed up progress toward the goal closer to the 2025 deadline.

This delaying tactic should be a no-go. Rather, by the Sept. 28 announcement, it should be clear to auto manufacturers that they have to get their research-and-development show on the road sooner, not later. Then, by 2025, we can all breathe more easily.