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## Use mandates, not markets, to push high-mileage cars

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Everyone knows that \$4-a-gallon gasoline in 2008 finally led Americans to abandon their gas guzzlers and start buying gas sippers. Everyone is wrong.

According to a new report released with little fanfare by the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans bought vehicles in 2008 that averaged only 0.4 miles per gallon better than a year earlier, when gas cost nearly 50 cents less.

Yes, some car buyers looked for ways to drive cheaper. Some dealers ran out of highly efficient hybrids. And many gas guzzlers sat ignored on dealers' lots.

But the price of gas -- which had been increasing every year since 2002 -- wasn't enough to significantly alter the fleetwide fuel economy of 2008 cars and light trucks. Indeed, mileage has been essentially unchanged for more than a decade.

So much for conventional wisdom (and the argument of economists and auto executives) that market forces -- that is, more-expensive gasoline -- will lead Americans to demand the most fuel-efficient vehicles.

There is a big lesson in the Environmental Protection Agency's fuel economy trends report: To reduce global warming pollution and our oil addiction, we cannot just count on gasoline prices to move consumers to high-mileage models. (Of course, it doesn't help that automakers deliver few high-efficiency models and until 2012 our laws don't require them to do so.)

Rather, the government needs to ratchet up over time the two mechanisms it uses to require the automakers to cut emissions: Corporate Average Fuel Economy, or CAFE, standards and the EPA's greenhouse gas emissions standards.

Only then will car companies begin installing efficient engines and using high-strength lightweight materials and other modern technologies to put us in cars and light trucks that cut pollution.

President Barack Obama did the right thing when he announced in May that the fuel economy average must rise from today's 25 mpg to 35.5 mpg by 2016. That was the single biggest step the United States has taken to fight global warming. But this good step deserves another.

Cleaning up cars is like painting a bridge. As soon as one end is finished, it's time to start again at the other.

Given the industry's history of intransigence -- for decades it has fought tougher mileage rules -- the administration needs to begin setting more stringent standards for beyond 2016 when Obama's order expires.

There has been lots of evidence during the past year that free-market advocates are wrong. Here's more: Higher fuel prices do not force us to change our wasteful and polluting ways. Good laws do.

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