

Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang: California can lead the U.S. in kicking the gasoline habit

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OK, California. Please do it again.

Seven years after the state paved the way with major cuts in global warming pollution from automobiles, President Barack Obama ordered up similar progress for the nation's entire fleet. Now it is time for California to lead the country to the next big thing: Kicking the gasoline habit.

Given the state's green history, its reliance on the automobile and the looming threat of global warming, it is only natural that California show the rest of the country what the future can look like – at least from the vantage point of the freeway.

In 2002, the state passed a law requiring automakers to significantly cut tailpipe emissions of greenhouse gases. A dozen states followed Sacramento's lead. Last month, the Obama administration extended the program to cover the nation.

By 2016, cars and trucks across the country will be required to average 35.5 miles per gallon.

The United States' biggest single step in the fight against global warming will bring a new gleam to California's reputation as an environmental pioneer. The state ought to be proud. It introduced Detroit to the 21st century.

The national adoption of California's Pavley rules, named for then-Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, offered new evidence that when California leads, others follow.

The state law that became the model for national action will bring a 30 percent reduction in global warming pollution from automobiles when fully phased in, in 2016 – a full 14 years after the bill passed.

The arduous task of bringing change to the auto industry is like painting a bridge. As soon as you reach one end, it is time to start again at the other.

It takes five years to bring a car from designer's sketch to assembly-line reality. So, it is time for California – Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Air Resources Board – to start on the next round of requirements if the cars of model years 2017-2022 are to make the needed cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

The changes in engineering that will allow automakers to meet this current round of state and now federal regulations are sitting on the shelf. They rely on making gasoline engines run more efficiently. But those changes take us only so far.

California's new mission is akin to ordering up the sort of innovations that have transformed the music industry.

Recordings no longer rely on wax cylinders or vinyl discs, but on digital media. To preserve our atmosphere we must shift to 21st century technology to run our cars and light trucks.

The United States can't get from here to there – achieving the sorts of emissions reductions that scientists say we need to turn back global warming – without moving beyond the internal combustion engine.

Will the car of the future be a plug-in hybrid that largely runs on rechargeable batteries, with a gasoline engine as a backup? Will it rely only on batteries? Will it rely on hydrogen for fuel? We don't want to dictate what the next automotive power plant will look like.

What is important is that California continues to put pressure on the nation's auto industry – and Detroit's engineers – to take us to the next level. The key is setting standards strict enough to move the industry to begin to phase out the internal combustion engine.

By leading the way, the state will show Washington, D.C., as it did over the past seven years, how to bring the rest of the country along. Additional reductions in emissions will help lessen the impact of global warming around the world. But there is a special need in California.

Heat drives up ozone pollution. Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Visalia, Fresno and Sacramento are among the 10 most ozone-polluted metropolitan areas in the United States, according to "The Climate Gap," a study published last month by professors at UC Berkeley, the University of Southern California and Occidental College.

Cut the risk of global warming and we reduce the number of Californians who "already suffer a relatively high disease burden from air pollution," the report said.

California's natural and economic resources will also benefit.

The rivers, and the ecosystems that depend on them, will gain from a reduced risk of summer drought. Sensitive species such as the Sequoia and redwood will be spared the worst effects of global warming.

And gasoline savings mean that money that would have been exported for oil will instead be spent locally, helping build California's economy and jobs.

The decisions made in Sacramento must be sufficiently tough to propel the auto industry far enough down the road that we finally begin to break our addiction to oil and the internal combustion engine. They can shape the nation's autos for decades to come.

What's good for California is good for the nation.

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