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Set tougher mileage standards for vehicles

BY DAN BECKER and JAMES GERSTENZANG

What is the best way to prevent future disasters in the Gulf of Mexico? Break our addiction to oil.

One year ago, President Barack Obama took the biggest single step in this direction. He boosted the nation's fuel economy standard and established the first U.S. standards for greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks.

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As a result, new vehicles will average 35.5 miles per gallon by 2016, up from the current 27.5 m.p.g. The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates this will save 1.2 million barrels of oil a day in 2020.

That's the good news. The bad news is we have a long way to go.

The lesson of the BP disaster is that we must now substantially toughen those standards. They need to be strong enough that auto companies will produce cars that begin to break our reliance on the internal combustion engine. To do that, the Obama administration will have to weaken the grip of big oil and the auto industry.

The new mileage standard represents a 4% annual increase in fuel economy. If it is next increased to 5.5%, from 2017 to 2025, we could ultimately save an additional 3.5 million barrels of oil a day.

Accomplishing this is not rocket science. It's auto mechanics. Better engines, improved transmissions and aerodynamic, hybrid and new electric vehicle technology are all awaiting installation by Detroit.

Given their track record, the car companies will only use them if we adopt tough standards. We own GM and Chrysler. Let's tell them and the other automakers: It's time to help, not hinder. Use your engineers, not your lobbyists.

The president has already instructed the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, teamed up with the California Air Resources Board, to begin work on the standards that will take effect when the current rules run out at the end of 2016.

California is indispensable. When automakers blocked progress in Washington, California broke the logjam. It approved tough standards in 2002 that set the course for the national rules Obama announced in May 2009. California's continued involvement will help break down the automakers' next barricades.

The key tool Obama can use is the Clean Air Act, passed by Congress and blessed by the Supreme Court.

Among the worst ideas: Sarah Palin invites us to ravage the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Canada is already shipping millions of barrels of oil to the U.S. from the vast earth- and sky-befouling operations at its Alberta tar sands. But why trade disaster at sea for looming pollution catastrophes on land?

We're left with the need to move beyond gasoline and diesel. What automakers won't do on their own, they will in response to strong leadership.

The challenge to Obama is setting fuel economy and emissions standards tough enough to break our oil addiction.

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