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President Obama On Global Warming: Finally Part Of The Solution

Let's give a cheer for President Obama's order Monday that his Environmental Protection Agency reconsider President Bush's rejection of the request by California and 13 other states to write their own rules on greenhouse gas emissions. Clearly, they will be tougher than anything the Federal government has produced.

On his fifth full day in office, the president did what he said he'd do on a central environmental question. Excellent.

Now, on to why it matters, and, most important, what's next.

The decision sends these important signals:

It says the Obama administration is taking with utmost seriousness the challenges posed by global warming, regardless of the obstacles erected by the struggling auto industry.

It is a sign to the states that when they come up with good ideas, they should take the lead--and to the federal government to get in line.

The United States has produced more greenhouse gases than any other nation. Now, after years of knuckle-dragging, Washington is willing to step to the front of the line in decisions that will slash the amount of carbon we pump into the global atmosphere.

The background: In December, 2007, the Bush administration's EPA refused to give California and 13 other states a waiver to allow them to impose tailpipe emissions on vehicles sold on their car lots.

The Bush administration argued that by increasing the required fuel economy of U.S. cars and light trucks to 35 miles per gallon by 2020, the president was already addressing the issue.

However, the California standards will save Americans billions of dollars at the gas pump by cutting America's addiction to oil--meaning cuts in petroleum imports that will alone be greater than the amount of oil we bring in annually from Saudi Arabia.

In short, they will be the biggest single step we can take to curbing global warming. That's nothing to sneeze at when the auto companies charge back with their likely complaints that the tougher standards will force them to raise prices--at a time when they are already struggling to sell their cars, pickups and SUVs.

California and the other states acted under Clean Air Act provisions that allow them to set standards stronger than those of the federal government, but only if the federal EPA grants them a waiver. California was joined by Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, New

York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington, along with the District of Columbia.

California sought that permission in 2005, coming up with standards it said would cut by 30% the greenhouse gas emissions from its passenger cars and light trucks by 2016. Detroit resisted mightily--and found a friend in the Bush White House.

With Monday's action, the President recognized Washington's past failures and committed the federal government to strong action.

"Year after year, decade after decade, we've chosen delay over decisive action," Obama said. "Rigid ideology has overruled sound science. Special interests have overshadowed common sense. Rhetoric has not led to the hard work needed to achieve results -- and our leaders raise their voices each time there's a spike on gas prices, only to grow quiet when the price falls at the pump."

"The federal government must work with, not against, states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," Obama said. He added: "The days of Washington dragging its heels are over. My administration will not deny facts; we will be guided by them."

To be sure, the auto industry will be gunning to shoot down the president's decision. It will argue that specially in its currently debilitated state, it cannot afford to comply with new "costly" government mandates. In truth, the industry that can't sell its gas-guzzlers, can't afford not to.

So, what do we get as a result?

For one, dramatically cleaner cars.

For another, a presidential commitment to put technology to work to green-up the economy.

But perhaps most important, we are getting a change: A government ready to demonstrate that it can be part of the solution--rather than part of the problem.