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Bush, Blowing Global Warming Decision, Opens Door for Obama

In a little-noticed decision, the Bush administration this week slammed the environmental door -- walking away from what could have been its most far-reaching measure to cool a warming climate while heating up a frozen economy.

With the same stroke, President Bush handed the Obama administration a major opportunity to establish its own environmental credentials, even as it wrestles with an economic bailout made all the more pressing by Friday's frightening 7.2% unemployment report.

As a result, the new president can use sound policy to set the Detroit Three on a globally competitive track, and fight global warming while also starting to right the economy.

How did Bush blow it this time? He punted on the key decision to set new Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards. The proposal his Transportation Department spent a year preparing would have increased the average efficiency of US cars, SUVs and other light trucks from 25 mpg to 31.8 by 2015.

This would begin to cut the nation's oil addiction and global warming pollution, save consumers billions of dollars at the pump, and tell sputtering automakers what the government -- and consumers -- expect and demand of them. It would have been the first significant change in the standards since President Gerald R. Ford signed them into law in 1975.

It's not as if the Bushies didn't understand the benefits of action.

The administration's 523-page draft said that over their three decades, CAFE standards "saved consumers money by reducing fuel needs, strengthened energy security by reducing dependence on foreign oil, conserved petroleum, a non-renewable resource, and helped to protect the environment by reducing the emissions of carbon dioxide, the most important of the man-made greenhouse gases."

Oh, and it was oilman Bush who sternly declared in his 2006 State of the Union address that we are "addicted to oil."

But enough about the Bush administration. They're toast. Now comes President Obama.

Candidate Obama made clear in his speech to the Detroit Economic Club in 2007 that he gets it:

The United States' dependence on oil puts the nation at security risk, he said. It also jeopardizes the planet.

"The fossil fuels we burn are setting off a chain of dangerous weather patterns that could condemn future generations to global catastrophe."

Because Detroit refuses "to make the transition to fuel-efficient production," he committed himself to "require automakers to meet higher fuel standards and produce more fuel-efficient cars..."

So now it's Obama's responsibility to act.

He was specific: Raise fuel economy standards by 4%, which would be approximately one mile per gallon, each year.

And Detroit can do even better. Car makers have cost-effective technology -- better engines, transmissions and improved aerodynamics -- to deliver, on average, 35 miles per gallon by 2015 and 42.5 mpg by 2020. What a contrast with the 31.8 mpg standard that Bush wouldn't even issue.

While he's at it, a President Obama can reverse Bush's refusal to allow California and 13 other states to implement their laws slashing cars' global warming pollution. When the Bush EPA blocked the states from acting a year ago, Obama said: "If the courts do not overturn this decision, I will after I am elected president."

With these actions, Obama can send two early signals of his commitment -- and of his adherence to a new course to fight global warming.

The change he can deliver will bring cleaner cars that save gas and money and cut pollution. By forcing automakers to make cars we want to buy, he can also save Detroit.