

Don't drag California back to the bad old days

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BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD



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President Donald Trump hosts a discussion at the American Center of Mobility in Ypsilanti Township, Mich., on Wednesday. The president announced plans to re-examine federal standards for the fuel efficiency of new vehicles.

It was a stellar day for clean air, smart policy and wise business in July 2011, when most domestic and foreign automakers, still grateful for a federal bailout, agreed to strict nationwide standards that would double the gas mileage of cars within few years.

Using a 2002 California law as the model, President Barack Obama announced the deal: By 2025, all vehicles sold in the United States would average 54.5 miles per gallon, drastically reducing carbon emissions in the process. Gov. Jerry Brown crowed about “intelligent regulation,” and gave credit to his predecessor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who sued for the state’s right to enforce tough standards despite former President George W. Bush’s opposition.

And so it was especially disheartening last week when President Donald Trump announced plans to roll back the federal standards. His quest to Make America Great Again proved to be just another excuse to be stubbornly short-sighted.

Cheered by autoworkers in a small Rust Belt town outside Detroit, Trump helped set in motion a process that could subject the planet to more climate change and people to more pollution. It also would hobble the longterm viability of the very industry he professes to want to save.

“My administration will work tirelessly to eliminate the industry-killing regulations,” Trump vowed at a rally in Ypsilanti, Mich.

In siding with U.S. automakers – already profitable, but seeking to make more money off gas-guzzling vehicles – he opened the door for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to reassess the

emissions standards. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents General Motors and Ford, also has filed a lawsuit to block the regulations, renewed by the Obama administration in January.

As Trump promised, a decision to weaken the standards could come by next year, allowing cars to once again be less fuel efficient and spew more carbon dioxide.

But at that point, California almost certainly would invoke its federal waiver, which has allowed the Golden State to enact stricter emissions rules than the federal government requires. The EPA led by Scott Pruitt would almost certainly push back, perhaps challenging California's right to even have a waiver.

That would set up a legal battle of epic proportions, creating uncertainty for automakers at a time of shifting markets and an inevitable march toward autonomous vehicles.

And for what? For the millions of jobs Trump has promised to bring back to the Midwest, but will never materialize? To return to some gilded age of manufacturing? Back to when carcinogens polluted the air and the water, but entire communities were supported by the wages of men who went straight from high school to the assembly line?

"The assault on the American auto industry is over," Trump told autoworkers in Michigan. "Believe me, it's over."

As with many things that fly out of the president's mouth (or from his Twitter feed), that's not really true.

The truth is, it's too late to go back from the future. As California understands all too well, the only way to go is forward.

The Golden State led the effort to cut emissions, years before the Clean Air Act – and Republicans were among the champions of that effort. In the 1960s, you couldn't see the skyline of Los Angeles through the smog; more recently, the city has had some of its best years on record for ozone and particulate pollution. And while the air quality isn't healthy in much of the Central Valley, particularly in the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, it's better than it once was.

Automakers complain that it's hard to make vehicles to meet the emissions standards of different states, even though about 40 percent of the cars and light trucks sold in United States meet California's requirements and the rest don't.

Automakers also complain that they won't be able to meet tougher emissions rules from 2022 through 2025. The claim is a bit suspect since there's a disincentive to try because gas guzzlers are more profitable than hybrids or electric vehicles.

American companies, in particular, point to sales of SUVs and light trucks being up – in no small part because gas prices are down. And they claim – falsely – that Americans don't want more fuel-efficient vehicles.

But even if that were true, the present is no indication of the future. No matter how much the Trump administration fights the future, the years of people cruising in gas guzzlers are numbered.

European and Asian countries, recognizing the threat from climate change, are making their

emissions standards stricter, not more lenient. Germany and India, meanwhile, are considering banning gas-powered cars altogether by 2030, betting on electric vehicles taking their place.

Trump told employees from General Motors Co. and Ford Motor Co. on Wednesday that “there is no more beautiful sight than an American-made car.” Beauty doesn’t equal competitiveness, though, and the president is setting up the American auto industry for a big, beautiful long-term failure as its cars are increasingly excluded from international markets.

In the meantime, the development of autonomous cars will continue – and, for plenty of practical reasons, the technology under the hood will not be old-school fossil fuels. Tesla thinks cars should be electric and, using employees in California, is working to prove it.

Eventually, most automakers agree, vehicles will be thought of as a service, like hailing a driverless Uber or a Lyft for a fee, rather than an object to be owned and maintained. Companies are already testing autonomous cars on the nation’s streets; in California alone, there are more than two dozen.

Ford, in particular, has pushed the envelope, testing hybrid Ford Fusions without steering wheels, brakes or gas pedals on the very same streets of Michigan where autoworkers cheered for Trump, who wants to make it easier for them to make vehicles that will soon be obsolete.

There is no going back. If Trump wants to know how to make America great again, he should try California.