

Citizens share concerns on Trump fuel economy proposal

By Eric D. Lawrence / Detroit Free Press

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DEARBORN, Mich. — The worst days for Elizabeth Hauptman's son, Oscar, are those hot days in the middle of the summer.

That's when breathing becomes hardest for the 7½-year-old, forcing a trip to the family's home in Brighton so Oscar can use his nebulizer, which eases his asthma symptoms by creating a medicine-laced mist he inhales.

"If any parent has ever seen their child struggle to breathe, it's terrifying," said Hauptman, outside a hearing room Tuesday in Dearborn where the Trump administration's vehicle fuel economy and emissions proposal was being discussed.

Hauptman and other members of an advocacy group called Moms Clean Air Force had come to show their opposition to the proposal, called a rollback by opponents, because they want automakers to produce more fuel efficient and cleaner vehicles. The proposal, referred to as the Safer Affordable Fuel-Efficient Vehicles Proposed Rule for Model Years 2021-2026, would freeze ambitious mile-per-gallon standards after 2020 and prevent states, such as California, from setting stricter requirements.

Tuesday's public hearing was one of only three nationwide. The first was Monday in Fresno, California, and the last is scheduled for Wednesday in Pittsburgh. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Deputy Administrator Heidi King opened the hearing at The Dearborn Inn by offering words of encouragement, noting that 150 people had registered to speak at the event.

"Your views are very, very important to us," King said. "Your participation is a vital part of the process."

Part of the administration's stated rationale for pulling back on regulations that would require a steady increase in fuel economy to an average of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025 is that the higher cost needed to meet those requirements would mean more costly vehicles. That in turn, the

argument goes, would mean less of a willingness by consumers to pay for newer, more efficient and safer vehicles, a position that has been met with skepticism by opponents.

Jason Hayes, environmental policy director for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, echoed the government's argument.

"The endless press for ever-stricter environmental regulations can actually cause harm to both consumers and the environment. A reasonable regulation can balance ... social and environmental costs," he said.

But U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., while saying environmental protection and affordability must be balanced, called the "flat-lining of fuel economy standards" unacceptable. She also said the proposal to revoke the "California waiver" would ultimately hurt the auto industry and that reaching an agreement is the better course of action.

"Everybody wins if we work together, and everybody loses if we don't," Dingell said.

For automakers, such as Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, the hearing offered a chance to tout progress and signal a desire to continue making improvements. Automakers, in recent years, have been seeking one national standard and more flexibility to meet fuel economy and emissions rules, while noting that low-cost gasoline has affected the new-vehicle market.

"Let me be very clear, FCA supports the policy choice in favor of ongoing fuel economy improvements in the fleet, but that policy needs to be based on market realities as they have evolved since 2012," said Steve Bartoli, vice president for global fuel economy and greenhouse gas emissions compliance for FCA.

Bartoli noted that consumers have less incentive to buy fuel-efficient vehicles when gas prices are low and have shifted their buying habits to embrace SUVs over cars.

James Conway, cochair of the Energy Security Leadership Council, however, noted the ups and downs of fuel prices, and said his group finds the proposal "deeply misguided.

Conway's organization seeks to lessen U.S. reliance on oil.

“Our group expresses concern regarding the assumption in the document that oil prices will remain low through 2050. This assumption is a dangerous one that defies current market dynamics and historical precedent,” Conway said.

Jeff Alson, who retired in April after 40 years with the EPA, expressed dismay at the way the process has played out, questioning the validity of the analyses used by the EPA and NHTSA to justify the proposal.

He said he helped develop the current rules and believed that they represented real progress.

“I felt like I was doing my little bit to make the world a better place,” said Alson, who had worked as an engineer for the EPA in Ann Arbor.

Comments still being accepted

Written comments on the Trump administration’s fuel economy proposals are being accepted through Oct. 26. For information, go to <https://bit.ly/2NJBNQr>.

Entertainment & Life

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