



Opinion

The U.S. is leaving the Paris Agreement, Canada's not. Why follow on weakening car emissions standards?

Allowing our vehicle emission standards to roll back would harm our climate, our health, and our economy.



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Environment

Fixated on reversing the progress made under its predecessor, the current United States administration plans to weaken vehicle emissions standards. Less fuel-efficient vehicles in the U.S. are bad for Canada's climate, but things could get much worse if Canada adopts weaker standards as well. Due to the linked nature of U.S. and Canadian auto regulations and markets, this is a real danger.

Weaker vehicle standards would make it harder to reach our local, provincial, and national climate goals. Canada would forego 1.3 million tonnes of carbon reductions annually, the equivalent of adding 370,000 cars to our roads every year. Rolling back vehicle emissions standards would also hurt Canada's export-gearred carmakers, as California and 16 other states are taking legal action to keep the tougher standards. Canada should stay the course and break its link to weakening U.S. federal standards.



Toronto Public Health estimates that traffic-related air pollution accounts for about 280 premature deaths and 1,090 hospitalizations every year in Toronto alone. Flickr photograph courtesy of Nayuki

Unhappy about a favourable midterm review of vehicle emission standards conducted near the end of Barack Obama's former presidency, the Trump-appointed leadership of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently undertook a second review. It concluded that current standards are too stringent for automakers. The writing is on the wall: the U.S. will roll back vehicle emission standards for the years 2022 to 2025.

This has real implications for Canada: both the former government of Stephen Harper and current government of Justin Trudeau worked to align Canada with U.S. federal vehicle standards. It seemed like a great idea while the Obama administration was moving ahead with ambitious and achievable standards.

Because Canada's standards are tied to the U.S., they will automatically be rolled back by the Trump policy reversal—unless Ottawa takes action. The federal government needs to act immediately to de-couple from an increasingly backwards U.S. regulatory system. Instead, we should align ourselves with California and 15 other U.S. states that are showing leadership by keeping the previously approved

vehicle emissions standards. Quebec recently urged the federal government to do that.

Not doing so would come at an economic cost for Canada as it would limit our ability to sell cars to these jurisdictions, a recent study by the International Council for Clean Transportation concluded. Together these states account for 41 per cent of all vehicles sold in the U.S. and Canada. Weaker standards would also make Canada's car exports to China and Europe less competitive. Upholding stronger vehicle emissions standards is also a pocketbook issue: more fuel-efficient cars mean commuters spend less money on gas.

Transportation accounts for roughly a quarter of Canada's carbon emissions, making strong vehicle emission standards essential for reaching our climate goals. Current federal, provincial, and municipal plans, such as Toronto's TransformTO climate strategy, bank on the planned emissions savings from stronger standards. Giving them up by accepting the U.S. rollback of vehicle emissions will create a major hole in our climate plans.

Foregoing the planned emissions savings from the standards would worsen traffic-related

air pollution and increase the risk of respiratory illness, heart disease, cancer, and premature death. Toronto Public Health estimates that traffic-related air pollution accounts for about 280 premature deaths and about 1,090 hospitalizations every year in Toronto alone. Children and the elderly are the most vulnerable, which is doubly concerning: in Canada's largest city, 50 per cent of child-care centres, 43 per cent of schools, and 63 per cent of long-term care homes are in areas with the worst traffic air pollution.

Allowing our vehicle emission standards to roll back would harm our climate, our health, and our economy. From successful cap-and-trade auctions to municipal climate action, we are making headway in tackling carbon emissions. Let's not allow a shortsighted and uninformed U.S. administration affect our gains. Canada rightly didn't follow Donald Trump out of the Paris Agreement; we shouldn't follow him out of cleaner vehicle standards.

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