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Obama Announces New Energy, Environmental Policies

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President Obama today promised new U.S. leadership in the fight against global warming as he announced a series of steps aimed at making American cars more fuel efficient and reducing greenhouse gases, including a directive to the Environmental Protection Agency to reconsider granting California and other states waivers to set their own strict regulations on auto emissions.

In remarks at the White House at the start of his second week in office, Obama declared a national goal of ending dependence on foreign oil and called on Congress to pass a massive stimulus package that he said would help "create a new American energy economy."

Flanked by Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) and EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, he signed two presidential directives that could lead to the production of more fuel-efficient American cars with reduced tailpipe emissions.

The moves are aimed at reversing decisions by Bush administration, which he said had stood in the way of bold action by California and other states to limit greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles.

"The days of Washington dragging its heels are over," Obama said.

He said he could not promise a "quick fix" for the nation's dependence on foreign oil, but he pledged to "commit ourselves to the steady, focused, pragmatic pursuit" of energy independence.


Saying the nation has arrived at a "crossroads," he declared: "It will be the policy of my administration to reverse our dependence on foreign oil while building a new energy economy that will create millions of jobs."

Obama said the administration would ensure that the fuel-efficient cars of the future are built in the United States and would start by implementing new fuel efficiency standards for the 2011 model year.

"Our goal is not to further burden an already struggling industry," he said, but to help American automakers "prepare for the future" and "thrive by building the cars of tomorrow."

Separately, the State Department today named Todd Stern, formerly a senior official in the Clinton administration, as the new U.S. envoy on climate change. Stern, a partner in a Washington law firm and a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress think tank, coordinated the Clinton administration's Initiative on Global Climate Change from 1997 to 1999 and served as the top White House negotiator on the Kyoto talks on global warming from 1999 to 2001.

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With Stern's appointment, "we are sending an unequivocal message that the United States will be energetic, focused, strategic and serious about addressing global climate change and the corollary issue of clean energy," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said.

In the presidential directives he signed today, Obama instructed the Environmental Protection Agency to reconsider whether to grant California and other states waivers to regulate automobile tailpipe emissions linked to global warming, and he ordered the Transportation Department to issue guidelines to ensure that the nation's auto fleet reaches an average fuel efficiency of 35 miles per gallon by 2020, if not earlier. Under a 2007 law, the annual fuel economy increases begin with the 2011 model year, Obama noted. To meet the standards for 2011, he directed that a federal rule be published by March 30.

On Dec. 19, 2007, then-EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson blocked the efforts of California and more than a dozen other states to limit automobiles' carbon dioxide emissions, arguing that President George W. Bush had addressed the issue by signing a law that same day raising the corporate average fuel-efficiency standard to 35 miles per gallon by 2020. But California's tailpipe emissions rules would have effectively required even greater fuel-efficiency increases by seeking to cut vehicles' greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent between 2009 and 2016, something American automakers have resisted.

The Bush administration never issued near-term guidelines for tighter fuel-efficiency standards. The Transportation Department circulated a proposal last fall that would have required auto companies to build new cars averaging as much as 31.8 miles per gallon by 2015, compared with the current level of 27.5 miles per gallon, but it announced less than two weeks before Bush left office that it would not issue formal guidelines.

Obama today called U.S. dependence on oil "one of the most serious threats" facing the nation.

"It bankrolls dictators, pays for nuclear proliferation and funds both sides of our struggle against terrorism," he said in the East Room of the White House. "It puts the American people at the mercy of shifting gas prices, stifles innovation and sets back our ability to compete. These urgent dangers to our national and economic security are compounded by the long-term threat of climate change, which, if left unchecked, could result in violent conflict, terrible storms, shrinking coastlines and irreversible catastrophe."

Yet, for years "we've chosen delay over decisive action," Obama said. "Rigid ideology has overruled sound science. Special interests have overshadowed common sense."

Although states such as California have shown "bold and bipartisan leadership" on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, Obama said, "Washington stood in their way," risking the creation of "a confusing and patchwork set of standards that hurts the environment and the auto industry."

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) hailed Obama's decision on auto emissions.

"Allowing California and other states to aggressively reduce their own harmful vehicle tailpipe emissions would be a historic win for clean air and for millions of Americans who want more fuel-efficient, environmentally-friendly cars," Schwarzenegger said in a statement.

On the international front, Obama vowed that "we will make it clear to the world that America is ready to lead," and he called for "a truly global coalition" to protect the climate.

"That's how we will deny leverage to dictators and dollars to terrorists, and that's how we will ensure

that nations like China and India are doing their part, just as we are now willing to do ours," he said. "It is time for America to lead because this moment of peril must be turned into one of progress."

He added, "We have made our choice: America will not be held hostage to dwindling resources, hostile regimes and a warming planet."

Daniel J. Weiss, who directs climate strategy at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, praised the new administration for pressing ahead with ambitious fuel economy goals.

"President Obama has done more in one week to reduce oil dependence and fight global warming than President Bush did in eight years," he said in a statement. "His actions today respond to scientists' urgent warnings to reduce global warming pollution now before it's too late. These fuel economy measures come on top of \$90 billion of clean energy investments in his economic recovery package. This is a complete reversal of President Bush's policy of censoring or ignoring global warming science."

But congressional Republicans voiced misgivings, saying they were worried about the impact on struggling automakers.

"I am fearful that today's action will begin the process of setting the American auto industry back even further," [Sen. George V. Voinovich](#) (R-Ohio) said in a statement. "The federal government should not be piling on an industry already hurting in a time like this."

A spokeswoman for House [Minority Leader John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) called Obama's announcement poorly timed and ill-conceived, the Associated Press reported. "Our nation's automakers are struggling -- drastically restructuring and shedding jobs just to stay afloat," Antonia Ferrier said. "And now they are being forced to spend billions of dollars to comply with California's emissions standards, instead of using that money to save American jobs."

Granting a waiver for California to regulate tailpipe emissions would affect nearly half the U.S. auto market. Thirteen other states -- including Maryland -- and the District have already adopted California's proposal, while at least four others have pledged to do so. When the EPA rejected the waiver, Obama issued a statement saying the decision "is yet another example of how this Administration has put corporate interests ahead of the public interest. If the courts do not overturn this decision, I will after I am elected president."

"Not only is the new president a man of his word, but he's making a dramatic break with the Bush administration's climate policy," said Frank O'Donnell, who heads the advocacy group Clean Air Watch. "It's a powerful signal that science -- and the law -- will guide his administration's decisions. This should prompt cheers from California to Maine."

In the latest Washington Post-ABC News poll, global warming ranked last on a list of 11 issue areas that Americans wanted the president and Congress to focus on early in the Obama administration. Just 17 percent rated it as one of the "highest priorities." Most Republicans -- 57 percent -- called the issue a lower priority item.

In an ABC poll last July, however, 78 percent said the federal government should make fuel efficiency standards stricter than they are now. Large majorities of Democrats (88 percent), Republicans (68 percent) and independents (78 percent) alike supported the tougher approach.

Polling director Jon Cohen contributed to this report.

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