California Gets the Green Light to Regulate New Car Mileage


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President Obama has instructed the Environmental Protection Agency to grant waivers to California and other states that seek to regulate vehicle emissions and mileage. This reverses a Bush policy and has automakers up in arms.

Traditionally, the Federal government has set standards for emissions and mileage – standards that are widely criticized among environmentalists as being too lax. Starting in 1975, the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) regulations were enacted as a way to continually increase fuel efficiency of vehicles sold. The regulations came out of the '70s oil shocks and started with a mandated average 18 miles per gallon (MPG) of all the vehicles produced by each auto manufacturer in a given year, starting in vehicle year 1978. Fast forward to 2007 and the minimum has risen only to 27.5 MPG. In 2008, President Bush set a CAFE goal of 35 MPG by 2020.

California as a Leader

California has long been the leader of air quality regulations. The California Environmental Protection Agency and their subset California Air Resources Board (CARB), has put forward many standards and regulations that are copied by other states. Often times Oregon and Washington state have reached agreements on emission controls by copying what California has already put forward.

The new goals of California are to push up the CAFE standards of 35 MPG in 2020 to 35 MPG in 2016 for all vehicles sold in the state. It is the same standard, just moved up four years, which is not a big difference, but it sets the precedent for states to have control. California and the states that follow it in such regulations will, by sheer power of their purchasing power, force automakers to sell more efficient, less polluting vehicles, or face fines and lost sales.

Feeling it in the Pocket Book

For years you couldn't find new diesel cars for sale in California because of emissions standards – diesels put out more particulate matter than gas cars. Diesel emissions technologies have now advanced to the point where they are legal to sell in California. The total market for diesel passenger vehicles is very small in the US (but growing) and not being able to sell in California wasn't much of a loss for auto makers. Extending the reach of state regulations to every other passenger vehicle on the market will surely create a large impact as auto makers, who, thinking of lost market share, will finally bring us choices for efficient cars.

The Consumer is the Winner

To the auto makers that are resisting these changes, I feel no sympathy. Consumers have been wanting more efficient cars for years now – just look at the sales figures for hybrids. People of course are worried that better efficiency means less power and less safety, but these fears can be overcome. Yes your car will be able to accelerate when you need it to – yes it goes over 55 miles per hour – no it isn't made of tin foil to save weight. Don't just make more efficient cars for the states that require it of you – do it for the whole country. There may be a cost to retooling factories to make more efficient vehicles, but we all know the technology is here – just look at American cars for sale overseas and you will find very efficient vehicles.

Source: New York Times
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http://gas2.org/2009/01/26/california-gets-the-green-light-to-regulate-mileage/

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The search for better fuel starts with better plants

There is a new player on the local scene for biofuels - a plant called camelina. Camelina is part of the brassicaceae family along with canola, whose oil SeQuential uses in biodiesel production. Other more familiar brassicaceae are cabbage and turnips.

Camelina has been more or less overlooked in this region (with the exception of Montana) but its value as a rotational crop is starting to be realized. Rotational crops are used to break pest cycles and to revitalize soil that has only seen one crop grown on it season after season. Breaking pest cycles means that fewer pesticides have to be used, which is better for the health of farmers, laborers and the rest of us. This also decreases costs, as taken from the Eastern Oregonian:

> ... research shows [camelina] is well suited to conditions in the Pacific Northwest, requires low inputs of water and nutrients, and reduces disease, insect and weed pressure in wheat fields planted the following year.
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> "We are all painfully aware of the recent cost increases of inputs to grow conventional crops," he said, noting the cost of glyphosate, the main ingredient in products such as Round-Up, for example, increased significantly recently.
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> "If you are concerned about these costs, you should look at a crop like camelina," Johnson said. 'It can provide a net return equal to spring wheat without the high initial outlay of pesticides and a far lower need for nitrogen and we can harvest in July."

Camelina, just like canola, produces seeds that have a high oil content. These seeds get crushed by a crusher (Willamette Biomass Processors for example) that squeezes out the oil, which is turned into cleaner-burning biodiesel. The leftover crushed seed is a meal that goes to livestock as feed. I don't know what livestock think about camelina meal, but I know cows love canola meal - it was once described to me as 'cattle crack'.

So why am I excited about camelina? Both camelina and canola are rotational oilseed crops that don't require much water or fertilizer and canola actually has a higher output of oil per acre. More oil = more biodiesel, but because camelina is better on the land and can be grown on marginal soil, it pulls ahead as a better choice in my book.

Posted by Sasha Friedman
http://sqbiofuels.blogspot.com/2008/03/search-for-better-fuel-starts-with.html