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Now They Say They Can Do It

Detroit's struggling automakers could do themselves and everyone else a favor by dropping their increasingly untenable four-year legal assault on California's efforts to regulate and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks.

Three different federal courts have ruled against them. While President Bush has been far too sympathetic to their cause — for either Detroit's own good or the environment's — the Obama administration surely will not share those sympathies.

Nor is there any technological impediment, despite what the automakers have long claimed. According to the business plans submitted to Congress by General Motors and Ford as part of their appeal for federal help (Chrysler has been far less forthcoming) both companies appear fully capable of meeting, if not exceeding, the California standards.

In 2002, California mandated new motor vehicle regulations aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 30 percent by 2015. The law set no new fuel-economy standards, a federal responsibility. But a reduction in emissions of that magnitude would inevitably require big improvements in fuel efficiency in cars and light trucks, a category that includes sport-utility vehicles.

The automakers challenged the California law mainly on grounds that it pre-empted federal authority to set fuel-economy standards. Federal courts in California, Vermont and Rhode Island have rejected that challenge, arguing that California has the right under the Clean Air Act to regulate pollutants it regards as dangerous to the health and welfare of its citizens and that there is no conflict between California law and federal law.

Due largely to the recent popularity of more fuel-efficient models, today's passenger cars average about 31 miles per gallon, light trucks about 22 m.p.g.

In the business plan submitted to Congress on Dec. 2, G.M. stated that it could quickly and significantly improve on that performance: promising 37 m.p.g. in passenger cars and more than 27 m.p.g. in S.U.V.'s and pickups by 2012. Ford's plan indicated that it could do almost as well.

According to an analysis by the Natural Resources Defense Council, with those fuel-efficiency levels, G.M. and Ford could without much difficulty meet California's greenhouse gas emissions standards nationwide.

Even so, Detroit persists in its campaign, especially inside Mr. Bush's Environmental Protection Agency, which has refused to give California the permission it needs to implement the standards. More than a dozen states have adopted California's standards but cannot proceed until California gets approval.

President-elect Barack Obama's E.P.A. is almost certain to grant that permission, which would remove industry's last line of defense. Detroit could earn itself some badly needed respect and trust if it announced that from now on it will devote its managerial energies to the task of making much cleaner, high-mileage cars — rather than fighting sensible and essential efforts to control the spread of greenhouse gases.