

Our carmakers deserve their due

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On Tuesday President George Bush ordered the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to develop regulations that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions generated by automobiles. In Canada new measures are also in the works. Yet in all the hysteria over pollution and global warming, domestic vehicle manufacturers have taken an undeserved knock for being environmentally unfriendly. The truth is -- at least on pollution -- North American automakers are remarkably green, and vital to our economy and standard of living.

Consider the facts. Burning a cord of firewood -- the amount many woodstoves go through in a winter -- releases as many smogcausing emissions as 10 new SUVs will over their entire lifetimes on the road. As many pollutants will be released by painting a 10x12- foot room with oil-based paint as by driving an SUV from Toronto to Vancouver, and back.

So many improvements have been made to vehicle emissions in the past two decades -- some, admittedly, forced on automakers by governments, others motivated by consumer demands -- that it now takes 37 new cars to equal the pollutants produced by a single new vehicle in 1987. Thanks to advances in engine and exhaust technology, a new gasolinefuelled Chevy Suburban, one of the largest personal vehicles on the road, produces fewer pollutants than a Smart Car because the latter, although powered by a tiny 799 cc engine, nonetheless uses diesel fuel, which releases more particulates into the air.

It's true that on greenhouse gas emissions, which are allegedly contributing to global warming, fuel efficiency is the key. Carbon is a natural by-product of the burning of fossil fuels. Still, carbon dioxide is not a pollutant and does not contribute to the brown haze and smog alerts that are the #1 environmental concern of most urban Canadians.

So far no effective way has been found to capture CO<sub>2</sub>, whether in a car's tailpipe or an industrial smokestack, and keep it out of the atmosphere. Unlike true pollutants such as suspended particulates, nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide and volatile organic compounds, there are no "scrubbers" that can be installed. The only prevention is burning less gas.

But here, too, domestic automakers have been unfairly villainized. Industry-wide fuel efficiency has improved nearly 40% since the 1980s. And innovations already entering the market -- such as engines that shut down some of their cylinders when not needed for accelerating and passing, and more models of gas-electric hybrids -- could improve domestic vehicles' fuel consumption by nearly as much again in the next decade.

Many "green car" solutions, too, offer false environmentalism. CNW Marketing, for instance, a firm that specializes in assessing the energy and environmental impact of vehicles from planning, to building, selling, driving and disposal, estimated that a Toyota

Prius -- the godfather of hybrids -- over its lifetime actually causes 38% more environmental impact than a Hummer H3. For instance, when in electric mode, the Prius runs on large nickel metal hydride batteries. The nickel is smelted in Ontario, then shipped to Wales for refining, then to China where it is turned into nickel foam and to Japan where the batteries are built and installed in new cars.

Finally, the finished Priuses are shipped to dealers around the world.

Canadian automakers produce over 2.5 million vehicles a year. Ontario, which produces nearly half of Canada's total, is the 10th largest automaking jurisdiction in the world, employing almost 30,000 assembly-line workers. In all, nearly 600,000 Canadians are employed by car manufacturers, parts makers, dealerships and service stations. According to Statistics Canada, "for every \$100 consumers spent in a retail outlet in 2006, they spent \$19.12 at their new vehicle dealers. This was much more than they spent in supermarkets." All totalled, with annual sales domestically and abroad of nearly \$120-billion, Canadian car makers account for just under 10% of our GDP.

Yet despite its vital place in our economy and the great strides it has made in pollution control and fuel efficiency, the Conservative government chose in its budget this spring to introduce green incentives and taxes that favour foreign manufacturers over homegrown ones. This is at odds with its professed goal of seeking made-in-Canada solutions to environmental concerns. Let's hope the Harper government does not kill this golden (and increasingly "green") goose, even inadvertently.

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