

GUEST ESSAY

These Carbon-Spewing Vehicles Must Be Stopped

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At a gathering on the White House lawn last August, President Biden spoke of a future in which electric cars and trucks will be the only vehicles on the road. “The question,” he said, “is whether we’ll lead or fall behind” in the global race to achieve that vision.

Mr. Biden has been vigorous in pushing for the end of the internal combustion engine for cars and light trucks. In August he signed an executive order that called on the federal government to do all it can to ensure that half of those vehicles sold in the United States are electric by 2030.

But when it comes to electrifying heavy trucks and buses, among the most polluting vehicles on the road, the country is in danger of falling behind the efforts of other nations. After the global climate summit in Glasgow last fall, 15 nations, including Canada and Britain, agreed to work together so that by 2040, all trucks and buses sold in those countries will be emission-free.

Missing from that group was the United States (and China and Germany, for that matter). Developing standards in the United States to make those vehicles electric is essential if the nation is to meet its global climate commitments. Heavy-duty trucks are responsible for nearly a quarter of the greenhouse gas emissions from the nation’s transportation sector, itself the biggest contributor of those emissions in the economy. Clearly this segment of the transportation sector cannot be ignored.

But Mr. Biden has not yet set a deadline for when new models of those vehicles must be emission-free. The United States must be more aggressive. One opportunity for action could come this month, when the Environmental Protection Agency is expected to propose more stringent air pollution standards for heavy-duty vehicles.

The president did issue an executive order in December that set in motion a plan for all new cars and trucks purchased by the federal government to be emission-free by 2035. But for the United States to maintain its economic edge, address environmental injustices, improve public health and accelerate job growth, joining those nations pushing for all newly sold trucks and buses to be emission-free by 2040 is essential.

Beyond their impact on the climate, emissions from those vehicles have pernicious effects on human health. Tractor-trailers, delivery vans and heavier-duty pickup trucks make up only 10 percent of vehicles on the road, but they spew 45 percent of nitrogen oxide emissions and 57 percent of fine particulates, known as PM 2.5. Both are linked to premature death and chronic illnesses, including heart disease, lung cancer, stroke and childhood asthma.

The oldest and dirtiest diesel trucks are concentrated in urban areas around ports, industrial warehouses and freeways near low-income communities, making this an important environmental justice concern. A study by the Environmental Defense Fund found that eliminating pollution from freight trucks in urban areas and other communities by 2035 and from all new trucks and buses by 2040 could prevent 57,000 premature deaths by 2050.

Heavy-duty trucks are driven more than cars. UPS's 127,000 drivers drove about 3.3 billion miles worldwide in 2020, which averages out to nearly 26,000 miles per driver, nearly double the distance an average personal vehicle is driven in the U.S. Because electric vehicles cost less than half as much to drive as those using diesel fuel or gasoline, shifting away from internal combustion engines would provide large economic benefits to high-use commercial fleets. For instance, California estimates its zero-emission truck program will result in several billion dollars in fuel savings by 2040.

Medium- and heavy-duty truck manufacturers understand these economic benefits and are already investing in zero-emission technologies. These efforts have the potential to transform at least 30 percent of their new trucks to zero-emission vehicles by 2030 — and as much as 100 percent of the additions to urban fleets of transit buses, trash trucks, postal vehicles, cargo vans and heavy-duty trucks.

Vehicle makers are equally ambitious. Ford, for instance, whose F-series dominates the medium-duty truck market, has set a target of 2030 for 40 percent of new vehicle sales to be all electric. The company's recent \$11 billion investment with its main battery cell supplier in electric vehicle manufacturing includes plans to electrify its entire F-series lineup, including its F-750, which weighs as much as 18 tons.

U.S.-based bus companies are also moving forward on electrification. The bus manufacturer Proterra is experimenting with lightweight designs to increase electric vehicle range.

Private sector demand is high for zero-emission vehicles. By 2030, Amazon is aiming to have 50 percent of its shipments made by electric or nonmotorized vehicles. FedEx plans to

electrify its entire pickup and delivery fleet by 2040, the same year Walmart intends to complete converting its fleet to vehicles powered by electricity, hydrogen or renewable diesel fuel.

State governments also have zero-emission ambitions. California, 14 other states and the District of Columbia — which together account for more than one-third of truck registrations in the U.S. — plus the Canadian province of Quebec, share the goal of having 30 percent of new sales of emission-free heavy-duty vehicles within their borders by 2030.

But we still need national leadership. Without spelling out targets, Mr. Biden's executive order calling for emission standards for heavy-duty trucks and buses leaves a big hole in his climate change plans. To fulfill his ambitions on climate change, he must work with vehicle manufacturers, utility companies, urban communities and labor unions to ensure that all new truck and bus sales are emission-free by 2040.

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