

# Sitting in on the fuel-efficiency CAFE

**YOUR ENVIRONMENT** By Lisa Lillelund

**Beverly Citizen, Thursday, October 2, 2008, Beverly, Mass.,**  
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One of the statements in Tom Friedman's incredibly insightful new book really caught my attention: On page 17 of *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, "According to Amory Lovins, the experimental physicist who heads the Rocky Mountain Institute, if the United States had continued into the 1990s to conserve oil at the rate it did in the period from 1976 to 1985, thanks in large part to the improved mileage standards, it would no longer have needed Persian Gulf oil after 1985.

"When Reagan rolled back CAFE standards," said Lovins, "it was the equivalent of 'un-discovering' one Artic National Wildlife Refuge's worth of oil. It wasted as much oil as is believed to exist under the Refuge.'"

That is a pretty powerful statement and even if it were only partially true, it still demonstrates a very powerful way we can reduce our dependence on foreign oil through increased fuel efficiency in our cars and trucks.

CAFE standard comes from the term Corporate Average Fuel Economy and refers to the fuel economy standards for American cars and trucks set by our government. These standards were first established in 1975 following the oil crisis from the 1973-74 Arab oil embargoes. Various countries throughout the world reacted differently, but almost all countries established national energy- conservation policies and regulations to reduce the consumption of foreign oil.

Most countries, such as the United States, set goals of improving the passenger vehicle efficiency for new cars and trucks. With the leadership of Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, the Congress passed in 1975 the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, which created the CAFE standard that required passenger vehicle mileage to increase from around 13.5 miles per gallon in 1975 to 27.5 in 1985.

From the mid seventies through today, the European countries, Japan and Brazil, are continuously introducing national programs and regulations far greater than those in the United States to encourage conservation and reduce dependence on local and foreign oil.

Most of these countries have higher taxes for automobiles with large engines along with a national gasoline tax which is then used to offer citizens and corporations'

incentives and tax credits for fuel conservation and for investments in renewable energy such as wind, solar and biomass.

So here we are in 2008 with a national election upon us. A chance for us to choose the Congressional and Presidential leaders that we believe offer the most effective national programs for the country. What are the presidential candidates proposed plans for increased fuel efficiency? What can we learn from the mistakes and successes of our own programs and those in other countries?

Looking at the past leadership decisions, it is unfortunate to realize that in 1986, just as we achieved the 10-year goal of improving mileage from 13.5 mpg to 27.5 mpg for cars and from 11.6 mpg to 19.5 mpg for light trucks, President Regan chose to roll back the CAFE standard to 26 mpg for cars. Instead of continuing to improve mileage standards as was being done in other countries, our leaders chose to back away from fuel-economy standards.

Other factors hurt our progress such as when Detroit introduced the sport-utility vehicle and successfully lobbied that these vehicles be categorized as light trucks instead of cars so they would not have to meet the 27.5-mpg car standard. Another factor is that our appetite for these sport-utility vehicles grew because the oil industry kept lobbying Congress against increased gasoline taxes.

It has taken us from 1985 to late 2007 to once again enact regulations to gradually improve the U.S. fuel-economy standards and set a goal to reach 35 mpg for cars by 2020, which is around where European and Japan are already today.

Both candidates are looking into tax credits for people buying advanced efficiency vehicles with new innovations such as cars running on biofuels, natural gas, electricity and hydrogen. Lots of exciting possibilities — if our leaders support this research and development.

In reviewing the programs offered by each campaign, the Obama/Biden campaign offers greater chances of increasing fuel efficiency in American cars and trucks reducing pollution and oil consumption.

Hopefully candidates Obama, Biden, McCain, and Palin will all take the time to read Tom Friedman's book, *Hot, Flat and Crowded* to better educate themselves on practical and exciting solutions to improve our energy situation while increasing jobs in a new green economy.

*Lisa Lillelund is a regular columnist for the Beverly Citizen. She welcomes your comments at [lisa@mangonetworks.com](mailto:lisa@mangonetworks.com).*