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Better fuel economy can be hazardous to health

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The drive to raise the federal Corporate Average Fuel Economy standard is among the most foolish policies proposed in the name of national security. Raising CAFE standards would be unlikely to reduce American's dependence on foreign oil, but it would likely cause public harm.

Since 1974, domestic new car fuel economy has increased 114 percent, and light truck fuel economy has increased 56 percent. At the same time, the share of imported oil has risen from 35 percent of the oil consumed in the United States to nearly 60 percent.

Improved fuel economy makes it less expensive to drive. When driving becomes cheaper, almost everyone does more of it. Indeed, people drive more than twice as many miles today than in 1974.

Worse, the steps needed to improve fuel economy have historically had tragic

consequences. Improving fuel economy is primarily achieved by reducing the size and power of vehicles. Downsizing comes at a cost to safety. As consumer advocate Ralph Nader stated in 1989, "larger cars are safer."

Researchers at Harvard University and the Brookings Institution found that, on average, for every 100 pounds shaved off new cars to meet CAFE standards, between 440 and 780 additional people were killed in auto accidents --- or a total of 2,200 to 3,900 lives lost per model year. And using data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Traffic Safety, USA Today calculated that size and weight reductions undertaken to meet current CAFE standards had resulted in more than 46,000 deaths.

Requiring all vehicles to be smaller will increase the risk of death or injury in auto accidents. Despite all of the

hype about SUVs rolling over, such accidents are a minority of all accidents, and in every other kind of collision --- head-on, multicar or solo crashes into immovable objects such as highway dividers, trees and walls --- people in SUVs and large sedans fare better than those in smaller cars.

If drivers want smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles, they already have a plethora of choices. More than 50 makes and models sold in 2005 got more than 30 miles per gallon in combined fuel economy --- but none of them is a top seller. In most instances, people still choose their cars based on factors other than fuel economy. If fuel economy is their dominant concern, they already have plenty of options without shortsighted, perhaps dangerous, government action.

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