

Green Auto Solutions Need Public Support

by Jim Stickford

Public acceptance of new fuel-efficient and clean technology will be a key factor in OEMs meeting the new federal mileage and emissions standards.

The message from Nancy Homeister, manager of fuel economy greenhouse gas regulatory strategy at Ford, at the recent U-M auto conference on new CAFE Standards held on Feb. 13. The theme was auto product portfolios in the age of CAFE.

"It's nice to have stability," Homeister said. "The first fuel standards were set back in 1975 and they gave us the 25 mpg that we have now."

"The EPA started setting new truck standards back in 2010, and then Obama came up with his new fuel standards in 2010 that began to go into the years 2012-2016.

"Then we adopted a second set of national standards that have an endgame of 54.5 mpg by the year 2025."

Just having all the national programs from the EPA, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSHA) and the state of California align is good for the OEMs because they know what they have to meet, Homeister said.

She also said that this regulation has been written so far in advance that there will be a mid-term analysis in 2018 to if it's possible for OEMs to meet the new fuel and emission standards.

"Consumer acceptance is the key to meeting these standards," Homeister said. "Ultimately, we can build anything, but if we can't sell it, the tech does us no good."

One of the key factors in getting the public to accept new technology is to get the cost down. She said that another conference speaker, John German, a senior fellow at the International Council on Clean Transportation, talked about how factoring in inflation, the cost of fuel will be very low when looking at the cost of driving per mile.

Part of the equation is the improvement in mileage from standard internal combustion engines (ICE).

"The Ford EcoBoost system has proved to be very popular," Homeister said. "If fact it's more popular than we expected. The F-150 EcoBoost truck has proven to be a great seller. By the end of the year, 90 percent of our nameplates will have the EcoBoost option, and that is slightly more expensive than a standard engine."

The reason why Homeister and others at Ford were slightly surprised was that cost is a factor in

getting people to switch to new technologies. It is very difficult to get consumers to switch if that technology is more expensive. Another factor which affects consumers' willingness to adopt new drivetrain systems is the lack of infrastructure.

If there aren't enough places to charge a vehicle that uses an electric motor, buyers are hesitant to get such a car. Natural gas and hydrogen-powered vehicles need their own "gas stations" for consumers to use.

She said diesel technology has improved and now many gas stations are carrying diesel fuel.

Homeister explained that Ford's perspective is that in order to meet the new fuel and emissions standards, the technology has to be economically feasible, socially responsible and environmentally friendly.

Part of that is improving standard ICE vehicles. Using a 2005 base, Ford has already improved 2013 engines by 28 percent and by 2015 is aiming for a 40 percent improvement.

And as Homeister stated earlier, customers have to be willing to pay for new technology, and that tech must provide them with a vehicle range capability that they are comfortable with combined with infrastructure that is able to support the new technology.

"There are a lot of factors that are out of our control," Homeister said. "We've all now agreed to the same framework."

"We have stability and standards. Now we need to make sure that our solutions, whether they are electric, diesel, biofuel, hydrogen or natural gas, are supported by the marketplace."

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