

Opportunity knocks

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

One simple way for the nation to reduce our dependence on foreign oil, cut greenhouse gas emissions and - with gasoline near \$3 a gallon - save money is this: Require cars to go farther on a gallon of gas. Simple, yes, but politically difficult; mileage standards for cars haven't been raised in 32 years.

But Congress is poised to change that. The House and Senate are debating different versions of a new energy policy act, and the House could vote on its version as early as today. The centerpiece is a 40 percent increase in the so-called "fleet mileage standards." Currently cars must get 27.5 miles per gallon and light trucks 22.5. If the House bill passes, manufacturers' entire fleets, cars and trucks alike, would have to average 35 miles again.

The bill also would mandate increased use of alternative fuels, including ethanol. And it contains a controversial provision to require utility companies to produce 15 percent of the energy they supply from renewable sources such as solar and wind power. That provision has attracted strong opposition, with White House officials hinting that President George W. Bush could veto it over that requirement.

The bill is far from comprehensive, but it should be passed, if only for the increase in the fleet mileage standards and the fact that cars and light trucks will be measured by the same standard. For too long, manufacturers have pushed buyers into higher-profit light-truck segment (pickups, SUVs and minivans), even though they consume more fuel and thus produce more greenhouse gases.

Greenhouse gas emissions in the United States are projected to rise 35 percent by 2030. The new standards in the House bill would cut 192 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions by 2020. That's a sizeable reduction. But it's still a relatively small part of overall U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, which were estimated at 7.2 gigatons in 2005. One gigaton equals one billion metric tons.

Increasing vehicle mileage standards would save about 1.1 million barrels of oil per year - about half of what we now import from the Persian Gulf region. Buying that oil puts money into the hands of radical anti-American groups.

It's encouraging that Congress finally has found the political will to act. U.S. automakers and Toyota had lobbied vigorously against the new mileage standards. A compromise reached over the weekend would give car makers more flexibility in meeting them, including credits for producing vehicles that can run on a mixture of 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline.

The energy bill also calls for drastically expanding alternative fuels, although exactly how much still is being

debated. Much of the increase would come from so-called advanced ethanol made from plant fiber instead of corn.

As useful as the energy bill would be, it still only scratches the surface of what can be done. In a separate report, the international management-consulting firm McKinsey & Company recently estimated that up to 870 million tons of annual greenhouse gas emissions could be cut simply by improving energy efficiency in buildings and appliances. The consultants estimated that total annual savings of 3 to 4.5 gigatons are available nationwide.

Much of the cost of those improvements would be recaptured through savings from decreased energy use. The catch, however, is that reductions on that scale would require spending money up front, and developers are reluctant to do that. Congress can encourage them by providing tax credits for builders, families and businesses that install insulation and more efficient heating or cooling equipment, for example.

While Congress debates the energy bill, high-level international delegations are gathered for a global warming summit in Bali, Indonesia. The rest of the world clearly is moving toward a more sustainable future. The United States must go along, and the energy bill is an encouraging first step.

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