

Not rocket science

by the St. Louis Post Dispatch

Earlier this week, Congress began debating a sprawling energy bill at a moment ripe for meaningful, long-term progress. Americans' awareness of energy-connected problems - from Middle East politics and terrorism to air and water pollution, global warming and soaring gasoline and utility costs - has never been more acute.

A key provision of the proposed bill would give auto manufacturers 13 years to increase the average fuel economy of their fleets from around 27.5 miles per gallon to 35. Leaders of the Big Three American automakers say it's not possible. Requirements of a 27 percent increase in average mileage by 2020 "don't look achievable," said Rick Wagoner, chief executive of General Motors.

Wagoner is wrong. In a 2002 report, the prestigious National Academies of Science estimated that cars could be engineered to average 36 miles per gallon using technology that already was commercially available. The same report determined that sport utility vehicles could be tuned to get 29 miles per gallon, minivans and pickups 32 miles per gallon - again using existing technology as of 2002.

Significant improvements in energy production and consumption are crucial to America's long-term national and economic security. The great technological challenge of our age is the race to develop clean, high-efficiency energy technologies, and if we hope to win that race, we need to get serious about competing - sooner rather than later. The Democratic leadership in Congress is talking about the need to combat global warming and reduce our dependence on foreign sources of energy, but even the Democrats are not speaking with a single voice.

For example, Sens. Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow, both from Michigan, have drafted an amendment to the energy bill that would set the mileage target for cars slightly higher than 35 mpg but give manufacturers even more time to meet them. It also would set separate, lower standards for light trucks and allow automakers to opt out of mileage standards entirely if they can demonstrate that meeting the requirements is too expensive.

One big problem with an opt-out provision is that there's no way to calculate the costs on the other side of the ledger: How much more expensive will it be to take action on global warming if the damage is allowed more time to accumulate? How much harm will our national political and economic interests suffer as a result of additional years of dependence on oil from unstable or anti-American regimes such as Venezuela, Nigeria and Iraq?

The energy positions of our region's senators vary. Illinois' Sen. Richard Durbin and Sen. Barack Obama, both Democrats, support the requirement of an average 35 miles per gallon by 2020. Missouri's Republican Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond has aligned himself with Levin's weaker proposal, as he has in years past.

It's disappointing to find Missouri's other senator, Democrat Claire McCaskill, leaning toward the Levin/Stabenow plan. The precise details of that proposal have not yet been made public, but McCaskill told us Wednesday that she will support it if it also includes a sizable increase in funding for research into breakthrough automotive technologies.

Fleet fuel economy standards haven't changed in 20 years. In too many models, advances in automotive technology have been used to beef up horsepower and power larger vehicles, rather than to increase fuel efficiency.

In confronting technological challenges, it has become a cliché to cite President John F. Kennedy's 1962 pledge that America would land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of that decade. But eight years and billions of dollars later, it was done - cliché notwithstanding.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know where we need to go, and it doesn't take rocket science to get us there. Recognizing that the days of cheap oil are gone forever, American automakers should take the lead in developing more fuel-efficient vehicles, not wait for competitors to do it and then struggle to catch up.

Now is the perfect time for Congress to give the industry the push it seems to require.

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