



Safety Experts Say: Fuel Economy Gains Will Not Harm Safety

Claims that fuel economy standards compromise safety are wrong

The auto industry has cynically used a misleading “safety tradeoff” myth to battle higher fuel economy standards for years — the same industry which, according to the U.S. Supreme Court, waged the “regulatory equivalent of war” for decades against improved safety from air bags. The industry’s safety canard is not just hypocritical, it is wrong on the facts:

- **Historically, fuel economy standards did not decrease vehicle weight, or cause the proliferation of tiny vehicles.** A Ford executive claimed in 1974 that: “[fuel economy standards] would require a Ford product line consisting of either all sub-Pinto sized vehicles or some mix of vehicles ranging from a sub-sub-compact to perhaps a Maverick.” This dire prediction did not come true. *Eighty-five percent of the gains in fuel economy came from technologies that had no impact on vehicle weight or size.* As to the other 15 percent, while the heaviest vehicles in the fleet lost roughly 1000 lbs., manufacturers did not reduce the weight or safety of lighter cars. In fact, the Honda Civic gained 800 pounds and went from failing NHTSA crash tests to receiving the best possible rating for crashworthiness – 5 stars. The Ford Pinto and Chevrolet Chevette, notably unsafe vehicles, were replaced by the safer models of the Ford Escort and Chevrolet Nova. *Because automakers could get proportionally more fuel savings from reducing the weight of the heaviest class of cars, it was cost-effective to target those first, while the number of the lightest cars produced decreased.*
- **Heavier vehicles are not safer for their occupants, and SUVs and pickups trucks are far more dangerous than many other vehicle types for others on the road.** Some heavier cars are far more dangerous to both their occupants, and to others on the highway, than are lighter ones. *In fact, across many measures of safety, gas-guzzling SUVs are the worst performers. What matters most for safety is good crash design, not weight.*
- **The National Academy of Sciences’ conclusion on the historical impact of CAFE on safety is wrong.** NHTSA’s Kahane study, on which the NAS majority panel relied, is wrong because Kahane assumes that fuel economy standards cause an across-the-board reduction in vehicle weights, which did not happen. Kahane’s study also conflates the effects of vehicle *size* and the effects of vehicle *weight* on safety, producing distorted results. A recent study by Dynamic Research for Honda, applying Kahane’s methods to more recent data, found that *fuel economy standards had no negative impact on safety.*
- **Differences in vehicle weights, encouraged by the light truck CAFE loophole, are the most dangerous.** *Disparities* among vehicle weights are the cause of devastating crashes between smaller cars and behemoth SUVs. *Any convergence in vehicle weights from better fuel economy standards actually improves safety.*