

‘Who Killed the Electric Car?’ Tells of Vehicle’s Rise and Fall

With gasoline prices on the rise and global warming threatening the planet’s future, why would anyone be opposed to a car that uses no gasoline and gives off zero emissions?

This perplexing question is the central focus of Chris Paine’s compelling new documentary, “Who Killed the Electric Car?” Throughout the course of the film, Paine tells of the exciting development of electric vehicles and of their downfall, caused by corporate greed and government shortsightedness.

Public Citizen, the Center for Auto Safety and the Natural Resources Defense Council hosted the film’s first screening in Washington D.C. on June 20 at the Motion Picture Association of America. Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook led a panel discussion following the screening.

Through a variety of voices, the film tells the story about the development – and the eventual demise – of the modern electric car, despite its public popularity. By the early 1990s, General Motors (GM) had developed a prototype electric vehicle that ran on rechargeable batteries, gave off zero emissions and could drive 60 to 120 miles on a single charge. Inspired by GM’s technological breakthrough, smog-ridden California passed a mandate requiring all auto manufacturers to produce and sell zero-emission vehicles. The rule called for 2 percent of all new vehicles sold or leased in California to produce zero emissions by 1998, and 10 percent by 2003.

For consumers who gave the electric vehicles a try, the cars were an instant hit. But even as the vehicles gained popularity throughout California, the auto and oil industries fought to undermine the mandate.

Both industry groups aggressively lobbied against the zero-emissions vehicle law in California as well as in Washington, D.C. to gain Bush administration support against the California rule, and launched expensive public relations campaigns designed to make the public wary of electric vehicle technologies.

GM, DaimlerChrysler and a group of auto dealers even filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Fresno, Calif. in 2001, arguing that the rule was an attempt to usurp federal authority in regulating fuel economy. Before the year was up, the Justice Department filed a brief arguing that the state of California had no legal right to regulate car emissions.

California eventually caved to corporate and federal pressure and revoked the zero-emissions vehicle mandate in 2003.

If GM – the first in the market with electric vehicles – had further developed and promoted electric vehicles, it would be financially secure and a world automotive leader again, rather than a company on the verge of bankruptcy.

Paine’s film, which is independently financed, will anger viewers and inspire them to take action. Zero-emission electric vehicles are a technological reality drivers could be using now, but short-term corporate greed and government ineptitude are preventing their use and thwarting their development.

To find out when and where “Who Killed the Electric Car?” is playing, visit the film’s Web site at www.whokilledtheelectriccar.com.

— *Documentary film reviewed by Gwynneth Anderson*