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ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Europe Calls for Cutting Car Emissions by a Third. Not Enough, Critics Say.

By JACK EWING NOV. 8, 2017

Vehicles in Europe would have to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by almost a third by 2030 under proposals unveiled on Wednesday by regulators in Brussels, who were immediately criticized for not doing enough to combat global warming and for succumbing to pressure from Germany and its powerful auto lobby.

The proposals by the European Commission, the European Union's executive arm, would force automakers to cut vehicle carbon dioxide emissions by 30 percent by 2030 compared to 2021 levels, and to achieved half of the cuts by 2025.

To the disappointment of environmental groups, the commission declined to set quotas for how many zero-emission electric vehicles carmakers must sell by 2030. Instead, the plan offers financial rewards to carmakers if they exceed certain benchmarks for electric-vehicle production.

Critics of the proposal said that failing to set more ambitious targets could make European companies vulnerable to faster moving competitors like Tesla or emerging automakers in China. The Chinese government has ordered that 20 percent of the cars in the country run on batteries or other alternative fuels by 2025.

The emissions targets announced by the European Commission on Wednesday are "a half-step into the future," Ferdinand Dudenhöffer, a professor at the University of Duisburg-Essen said. "They spared themselves the other half-step because they are afraid of the future."

European leaders often portray themselves as leading the fight against climate change. But officials admitted on Friday that they had failed to stem the growth of carbon dioxide emissions from cars and trucks, which have increased 20 percent since 1990. Current policy in Europe promotes diesel vehicles, now the target of a consumer backlash after Volkswagen's emissions scandal highlighted the health risks from diesel exhaust.

The German government has often intervened in the past to block European rules related to emissions and fuel economy that it perceived as harmful to the country's automotive industry, a linchpin of Germany's economy.

German car brands like Audi, BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Porsche that emphasize big luxury cars have a harder time meeting tough carbon dioxide standards than companies like France's Renault or Italy's Fiat, which, in relative terms, sell more small cars.

The European Commission acknowledged consulting car industry representatives as part of the normal legislative process, but denied abandoning quotas under pressure from the German government or industry lobbyists. Quotas were never under consideration, the commission press office said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Any claims that we ever aimed to introduce quotas for electric cars are simply untrue and have no foundation," the statement said.

Miguel Arias Cañete, the top commission official responsible for climate action and energy, spoke by telephone on Friday with Matthias Wissmann, president of the German Association of the Auto Industry, a lobbying group, the commission said. Mr. Wissmann is a former German transportation minister with close ties to the German government.

"The phone call took place as part of an inclusive, broader stakeholder engagement by the commission aimed at listening to the views of all interested parties," the commission press office said in its statement.

Mr. Cañete said on Wednesday that the commission opposed quotas for electric vehicles because it did not think it should be choosing which technologies were best. "Instead we let carmakers decide," he said at a news conference in Brussels.

Mr. Wissmann also exchanged emails last month with Martin Selmayr, a top aide to Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission's president. Copies of the emails, viewed by The New York Times, indicate that Mr. Wissmann got some, but not all, of what he sought.

As Mr. Wissmann requested, the commission did not impose sanctions on carmakers that fall short of benchmarks for electric-vehicle production. But he failed to prevent the commission from establishing mandatory, interim goals for 2025.

Those who support quotas said that setting such quotas would encourage suppliers and other companies to invest in electric-vehicle technology by ensuring that there would be a market.

The regulatory package announced on Wednesday "amounts to handing the global leadership on electric cars to China, which will be delighted to export their models to Europe, jeopardizing jobs in Europe's auto industry," Greg Archer, clean vehicles director at Transport & Environment, an advocacy organization, said in a statement.

The plan also calls for Europe to spend 800 million euros, or $928 million, to build charging stations for electric vehicles, and €200 million to develop battery technologies.

Representatives of the car industry complained that the carbon dioxide limits were too onerous. Erik Jonnaert, secretary general of the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association, said the organization would push for a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions of 20 percent rather than 30 percent as the proposals make their way through the European Union's lengthy approvals process.

Volkswagen, which helped provoke the current debate by fraudulently concealing excess diesel emissions for a decade, is now trying to reposition itself as a leader in bringing electric cars to the mass market. The company was only mildly critical of the proposals, saying the European Union should do more to reduce emissions of the 250 million cars already on the road by, for example, promoting the use of synthetic fuels.

In a statement, Volkswagen reiterated its goal of introducing 50 all-electric models by 2025 and called the proposed reductions in carbon dioxide emissions "positive."

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