

Op-ed column by Stephen Saunders, president of the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization, which convened the Climate Action Panel

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As part of his plan to protect Colorado's climate, Governor Bill Ritter, Jr., has directed the Department of Public Health and Environment to consider requiring new cars and trucks to emit fewer heat-trapping gases. This was a unanimous proposal of the 34-member Climate Action Panel that recently recommended actions to reduce our state's contribution and vulnerability to climate change. There are plenty of good reasons why the blue-ribbon panel united behind this recommendation, why the Governor agreed, and why we should move forward.

First, we must have cleaner cars and trucks to protect our climate. One quarter of Colorado's heat-trapping pollution comes from transportation. Adopting new motor vehicle emission standards, by itself, would get us nine percent of the way to the goal set by Governor Ritter (and originally recommended by the Climate Action Panel) – reducing the state's greenhouse gas emissions 20% by 2020, compared to 2005 levels. This is one of the most important steps we can take.

Second, this is a key way to get Colorado on the list of states taking serious action to protect our climate, as most Coloradans want. Under the federal Clean Air Act, California can set its own, tougher emission standards for new vehicles, and other states can apply them instead of the weaker national standards. California has now included greenhouse gases in the pollutants to be controlled from new vehicles, including carbon dioxide coming out the exhaust and refrigerants leaking from air conditioners. Thirteen other states have adopted those standards, and Colorado and three other states are moving forward to possibly do so. These 17 states have 47% percent of the country's population. In Colorado, we're leaders on the environment, and we should be with the half of the country that is taking action.

Third, adopting these standards would save us billions of dollars. In the first few years of the standards, according to the California Air Resources Board, the purchase price of a new car, SUV, or truck would go up \$17 to \$367. In the eighth year, when the standards are strictest, the extra cost would be just over \$1,000. But in all cases, a car buyer would begin saving money when driving off the dealer's lot, because the cleaner vehicle would also use less gasoline. With an outdated price of \$1.73 per gallon, according to an analysis done for the Climate Action Panel, the fuel savings would so outweigh the higher purchase prices that on balance Coloradans would save \$1.9 billion by 2020. At realistic gas prices, the savings could easily top \$3 billion by then, and even more down the road.

Fourth, full consumer choice will be preserved. An engineering study done for several state governments documented that all current types of vehicles could reduce emissions enough just through existing technologies – not expensive hybrid engines, but relatively minor improvements in valves, crankcases, gears, and the like. The California standards also are flexible, distinguishing between light and heavy cars, SUVs, and trucks and applying to average emissions from a manufacturer's total sales, so each vehicle does not have to be equally clean.

Like many Coloradoans, my wife and I want to buy an SUV big enough to haul kids in car pools and stuff on trips to the mountains, and we'll still be able to.

The Environmental Protection Agency still must grant a waiver to let the California standards go into effect, and the U.S. Supreme Court has ordered the agency to stop stalling and make a decision. It might take a new presidential administration, but sooner or later the California standards will go into effect there and in other states. Let's have Colorado be one of that number. We can be part of the solution to climate change, and save money on gasoline, too.