

Look at Cars—Not Behind Trees—If We Want Cleaner Air

By HENRY A. WAXMAN
and JERRY LEWIS

The longstanding battle over whether clean air is important has ended. President Bush has settled the issue by setting out clear clean-air goals and eloquently articulating the need for decisive action.

The President understands that every American—children, the elderly, asthmatics, even healthy joggers—deserves clean air. And he has challenged Congress to deliver on this promise.

Now that we agree on our goals, Congress can focus on the next half of the debate: How do we clean our air? This is as much an economic question as it is an environmental one. We know how much pollution has to be cut. Now we need to decide who reduces that pollution and by how much.

The most important target of our efforts must be cars and trucks. From Long Island to Los Angeles, motor vehicles are the largest source of urban air pollution. Just as importantly, they provide the most cost-effective reductions available.

General Motors and the other auto makers, however, resist any further regulation. They are trying to apply the old tax adage—"Don't tax you, don't tax me, tax that fellow behind the tree"—to air-pollution control.

The auto makers argue that fairness is on

their side. They point to their huge investments in pollution reduction and rightly note that today's cars are much cleaner than the ones built 20 years ago. Unfortunately, those emission gains have been offset by a record number of cars on the road and an enormous increase in miles driven by American motorists. We will actually lose ground in cleaning the air if we complacently accept the 1970 auto-emissions standards as the best we can do.

Another argument is that we have exhausted technological innovations. One will hear, for example, that gasoline engines can't be made much cleaner and that cars powered by low-pollution fuels cannot be designed for significant production in the near future. Such thinking is narrow-minded and short-sighted.

If we impose inadequate requirements on gasoline-powered engines, the big losers will be "the polluter behind the tree"—local factories and businesses that don't have the money (or the Washington lobbyists) to argue their case now. Shoe factories, bakeries and dry-cleaners will unhappily find that they have most of the responsibility for reducing pollution and could face draconian measures.

That isn't fair, it isn't cost-effective and it probably won't result in healthy air.

Clean-air legislation must require vehicles to share equally with traditional stationary sources in the process of reduc-

ing emissions. Although no single measure can dramatically cut auto emissions, a host of new controls can bring significant gains at bargain prices.

First, the 1970 tailpipe standards should be gradually tightened to reflect technological advances. This will bring cleaner cars and will still allow the auto makers to adjust their production and planning schedules.

Another important reform is to require pollution-control equipment to last for the life of a vehicle. Right now that equipment only needs to last for five years or 50,000 miles, while most cars last for at least 10 years or 100,000 miles. Doubling the durability requirement will reduce emissions considerably and, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, will be among the most cost-effective solutions.

There also is tremendous potential in using an aggressive alternative-fuels program to supplement controls on gasoline engines. Low-polluting fuels—such as methanol, ethanol and compressed natural gas—are good for our environment and can bring new trade opportunities for U.S. companies. Developing this promise is one of the most exciting breakthroughs in clean-air policy.

It is one thing to put pressure on Detroit to ensure that an adequate number of autos use alternative fuels. It is quite another to successfully convince the oil industry that

it, too, must participate by shifting its profit sources from oil and gasoline to alternative fuels. That step will be necessary to make it practical to develop autos fueled by alternative-energy sources.

These measures, taken together, will significantly reduce emissions at the lowest cost. Factories and some small stationary polluters will still have to clean up. But by spreading the burden to all polluters, no one will have to do more than his fair share.

The Waxman-Lewis bill, which already has more than 130 co-sponsors, adopts this approach. It puts environmentalists eager for clean air in the same camp as economists eager for cost-effective measures. It means we can enact a law that is good for our environment and avoids unreasonable controls on local businesses.

While the Bush proposal requires too little from cars and trucks, it does provide a point from which to pursue serious negotiation toward reauthorization of the Clean Air Act. We look forward to working with President Bush to enact a clean-air bill that joins good environmental policy with sound economics.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) is the chairman of the House subcommittee on health and the environment. Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-Redlands) is the chairman of the House Republican Conference and author of legislation establishing the South Coast Air Quality Management District.