EU’s car emission goals for 2030 stir up ‘tech neutrality’ debate

The European Commission’s latest proposal on cars’ CO2 emissions for 2030 has started a fresh debate about whether Brussels has actually dropped its long-standing “technological neutrality” stance in favour of electric vehicles.
Earlier this month, the Commission unveiled its Clean Mobility Package, proposing that average car emissions be slashed by 30% by 2030, compared with the existing target for 2021.

This proposed figure drew the customary mixed bag of responses. Environmental groups complained that the proposal does not go far enough, some industry groups howled that 30% is too ambitious while others said the proposal actually strikes the right balance.

However, there was an unusual criticism heard from fuel producers and car manufacturers.

According to them, the Commission crafted a proposal that is too heavily geared towards electric vehicles. They claimed that the executive's approach in favour of vehicle mass to calculate CO2 targets is biased against conventional combustion engines. In their view, a footprint-based approach would have taken a wider view on the vehicle's overall carbon emissions, from well to wheel.

The Commission insists that it does not discriminate against a particular type of power unit, be it purely electric, hybrid or advanced combustion, and that the package is designed to help the competitiveness of Europe's car sector and improve air quality.

John Cooper, director general of trade association FuelsEurope, said that the proposal “explicitly...aims to support a gradual transition from vehicles powered by conventional engines to electric vehicles”.

The EU executive's response was composed. Speaking at a EURACTIV event last week, the head of the Commission's climate directorate, Jos Delbeke, insisted that “if there is a carmaker that can produce a traditional combustion engine under 50g [the CO2 limit], they are welcome to do so”.

Now that the package is being studied ahead of eventual scrutiny by MEPs and the member states, industry leaders want the resulting law to keep all options open when it comes to power units.

At the same event, ExxonMobil’s Policy Planning Executive, Khurram Gabi, praised the Commission for “doing a good job” on its proposal but also stressed the importance of maintaining tech neutrality, saying “we don't know with any degree of certainty where the next breakthrough will take place”.

“History has shown we're not great at picking winners. Electrification and batteries are touted as the silver bullet but it's not that simple,” he added.

This point was echoed by the European Automobile Manufacturers Association's Erik Jonnaert, who urged EU policymakers not to put “all our eggs in the electrification basket”.

“We need a full menu of options,” Jonnaert told participants at the EURACTIV event.

Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout (Greens/EFA), who is a vocal critic of the package, having previously called for a target nearer the 60% mark, also acknowledged that the future of mobility will need a wide range of solutions but warned that the EU has to get the mix right.
He accused industry leaders of only calling for tech neutrality to be respected when it is beneficial to their sectors, pointing out that EU law on biofuels does not respect this principle.

Eickhout also said that policies in Norway and the Netherlands, often touted as poster children for advanced mobility, are not tech neutral, adding: “setting a CO2 target and leaving it to the market does not hack it”.

Green groups were left mostly disappointed by the absence of binding zero emission vehicle targets (ZEVs) in the proposal. Greg Archer from NGO Transport & Environment (T&E) claimed the best way to make the EU a world leader would be “to introduce a ZEV sales target as China and ten US states have done”.

If the Commission had included such a target then it would have been hard pressed to convince the car industry that its proposal is technologically neutral, as that goal would have precluded even the cleanest and most efficient combustion engines.

**Tech neutrality in other sectors**

The idea of making policymaking technology neutral is not limited to transport. As part of the EU’s ongoing efforts to regulate the electricity market, the Commission proposed putting an emissions cap on which power plants can be subsidised.

This would involve precluding power plants that emit more than 550g of CO2 per kilowatt hour from receiving public money. A row between industry and the EU executive has boiled away ever since as many believe it to be an anti-coal measure.

But the Commission has been keen to stress that the proposal is completely technology neutral and has even said that coal power plants will be included in so-called capacity mechanisms if operators are able to get emissions down below the 550g threshold.

550g per kw/h is also the criteria used by the European Investment Bank, which no longer funds any projects that exceed this level. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development does not use a tech neutral approach and has actually adopted a ‘no coal’ mantra.