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Groups question fuel economy panel

By KEN THOMAS

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Business and environmental groups have raised questions about a scientific committee examining changes to current fuel economy standards, citing potential conflicts of interest and past ties to the auto industry.

The Transportation Department asked the National Academy of Sciences to update a key 2002 study on fuel economy rules and vehicle efficiency, giving regulators an independent review of the auto industry's work to build more efficient vehicles.

The National Academy of Sciences is an independent organization chartered by Congress to advise the government on scientific issues.

The 14-member committee was formed in mid-August to study the cost and potential improvements of technologies that could be used during the next 15 years. Its findings next year will be influential among policy makers -- the 2002 study was repeatedly cited by lawmakers during the Senate's debate in June on new efficiency standards.

But its composition has generated complaints over whether the committee can be impartial.

Environmentalists note that many of the panelists have worked for auto companies and suppliers. The committee, which includes engineers, consultants and academics, is chaired by Trevor O. Jones, the chairman and chief executive officer of Cleveland-based ElectroSonics Medical Inc.

Jones is a former executive with General Motors Corp. and TRW Inc. Others include Thomas Asmus, a retired senior research executive for DaimlerChrysler AG, Patrick Flynn, a retired vice president for research at engine maker Cummins Inc., and Linos Jacovides, a retired director of Delphi Research Labs.

"Giving such extraordinary weight to their perspectives is a recipe for a severely biased and therefore flawed assessment of technological potential," wrote Deron Lovaas, vehicles campaign director for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Business groups have also complained. In letters to the Academy this month, the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce questioned how some members might influence the final report.

"I am concerned about a troubling lack of transparency with regard to potential bias and conflicts of interest of certain nominees," Thomas J. Donahue, president and chief executive of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, wrote in a Sept. 5 letter obtained by The Associated Press.

A similar letter by former Michigan Gov. John Engler, the NAM's president, questioned the inclusion of David Friedman, research director of the clean vehicles program of the Union of Concerned Scientists, and Robert Sawyer, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

Engler wrote that Friedman's organization had "well-established and extreme views on this issue" and Sawyer, a former chairman of the California Air Resources Board, "has a history of supporting very stringent regulation of fuel economy."

Friedman said the public comments were "part of the process so everyone's got the right to weigh in." He said the Academy "does a good job trying to get good reports out there and I'm thankful to be part of the process."

Messages seeking comment were left with Sawyer.

The letters also questioned whether three other members who served on the 2002 panel could conduct a critical review of their own work. A separate letter by the Washington Legal Foundation noted that two members work for companies that sell fuel economy technologies, posing a potential conflict of interest.

William Kearney, an Academy spokesman, said the committee members are provisional. The organization was reviewing the balance of the panel's scientific perspective and potential conflicts of interest "and deciding whether or not we need to add other members."

"Our goal is to balance the committee for scientific perspectives while always ensuring that we have the necessary expertise to carry out the study," he said.

The 2002 panel had a mix of academics, engineers and those with ties to industry. That committee's chairman, Paul Portney, dean of the Eller School of Management at the University of Arizona, said he accepted the appointment on the condition that it would not include auto industry officials or those working for environmental advocacy groups.

"I wanted to minimize the opportunity for people from either side to say from the get-go 'There's no way this can be objective,'" Portney said. But he added, "The proof of the pudding is in the tasting -- if they produce a good report people will recognize that."

On the Net:

The National Academy of Sciences: <http://www.nationalacademies.org/>
