

Who's Minding the Cars?

Both parties are sounding off on VW's cheating — and the government's response



A probe into whether Volkswagen misled consumers when it dodged emissions standards could bring Republicans and Democrats together over shared criticism of the automobile industry and its regulators.

“Look, when there’s a failure of the federal government to protect the health and safety of people, we’re all united on that,” says Rep. Tim Murphy, a Pennsylvania Republican. As chairman of the House Energy and Commerce’s Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, he has pledged to hold a hearing on the issue in the coming weeks.

Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma and Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Chairman John Thune of South Dakota say their panels are also examining the issue. “From the top down this is a huge colossal screwup by VW,” Thune says.

Volkswagen’s admission that it had installed software on millions of diesel vehicles to get better emissions results in tests

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than in performance comes after several high-profile cases of auto manufacturers flouting U.S. regulations, most recently General Motors and Toyota. An EPA official said Sept. 25 that it will begin new tests of diesel cars and light trucks. In Europe, VW’s admission is reportedly raising questions about BMW, which also sells many diesel cars.

As with last year’s investigation into General Motors, congressional interest in VW’s emissions could also shine an unwelcome spotlight on auto regulators, in this case the Environmental Protection Agency.

The agency, which announced the news about VW Sept. 18, was alerted to the problem in 2014 after an independent West Virginia laboratory uncovered higher pollution levels in certain VW models during

on-road testing.

Other federal agencies are now investigating or are likely to, including the Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department.

Lawmakers have been scathing in their criticism of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration for failing to catch GM’s faulty ignitions and Takata’s defective airbags.

“I lay this not only on the corporate culture, I lay it at the feet of the U.S. regulatory agencies who ought to be doing their job, ought to be doing it in a forceful way,” Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida, the top Democrat on the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said in a speech Sept. 22. “And then there ought to be some prosecutions, and corporate executives that knew this and have done it ought to be

going to jail.”

Rep. John Mica, a Florida Republican, also says regulators are partly to blame. “Somebody in government dropped the ball.”

To Drew Kodjak, executive director of the International Council on Clean Transportation, the nonprofit that discovered the issue, the easiest solution is to give the EPA more resources so it can perform “real-world” testing, which is more expensive than the controlled tests it currently performs.

“You don’t want to rely on the happenstance investigation of a small NGO to trigger one of the largest global recalls around,” he says. “I think that’s the biggest lesson for all of this.”

But Murphy is skeptical that limited funds were the only problem.

“Oftentimes we hear its someone’s resources. We heard that on the General Motors issue,” Murphy says. “We have to find out if it’s more than just resources or it’s some kind of systemic problem.”

— Kellie Mejdrich