Auto mileage reports should reflect reality: Column. USA Today.

By Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang

With 2015 cars rolling off assembly lines, Americans can expect a barrage of auto company advertising misleading them about fuel economy. The ads tell consumers only part of the gas mileage story, sowing confusion about which cars are clean and which are not — and leaving buyers at risk of driving off in vehicles that get worse mileage than they expected.

Advertising matters. With accurate and complete information, buyers can easily choose the cleaner cars that the Obama administration's mileage-and-emissions standards force automakers to build, cutting America's oil dependence and emissions, the key contributor to climate change.

The Federal Trade Commission, which regulates advertising claims, is reviewing rules that give automakers great leeway in how they advertise gas mileage. The companies can post highway mileage without having to disclose lower city driving figures. Tougher controls are overdue.

To protect consumers, the commission should require ads to disclose highway and city mileage. It should also require the companies to advertise the combined city-highway mileage.

Standing alone, the highway figure is largely irrelevant. Daily life behind the wheel is made up of the stops and starts of commuting and idling at red lights, dragging fuel economy well below the claimed highway rating.

If only highway gas mileage is provided in advertising, "consumers are going to think that's the mileage they are going to get," says Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, with which our Safe Climate Campaign is affiliated.

An ad on Chevrolet's website for its 2014 Impala, to name one example, touts the sedan's "impressive efficiencies" and cites the 29 mpg rating of the six-cylinder model. But in the city? It is rated at 19 mpg. Combined fuel economy is 22 mpg, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's rating at the website fueleconomy.gov.

A 7-miles-per-gallon difference between highway mileage and the gas mileage drivers are more likely to get can be pretty costly — roughly $500 a year for the average driver paying $3.50 a gallon. But neither the city figure nor the combined city-highway number is included in Chevy's advertisement.

The Obama administration's rules will bring a new car fleet averaging 54.5 mpg in 2025. It is the
biggest single step any nation has taken to fight global warming.

The trade commission should make sure buyers get the facts. This will help consumers look for the efficient cars that will meet the increasingly tough fuel efficiency standards and prod auto companies to compete by selling better vehicles with greater mileage and reduced emissions. As Ford ads once said, that's "a better idea."

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Read the op-ed in USA Today. This commentary also appeared in the print or digital editions of The Salinas Californian, the Fond du Lac, Wis., Reporter, the Visalia, Calif., Times Delta, the Oshkosh, Wis., Northwestern, and the Green Bay, Wis., Press Gazette. A version of it also ran in the Huffington Post.