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## AUTOS

### Why 'clunkers' program won't take some of the most polluting cars

**The classic car lobby pushed to exclude vehicles made before 1984, protecting the market for parts. Consumer and environmental groups, too busy fighting for fuel efficiency, went along with it.**

By Ralph Vartabedian and Ken Bensinger

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Nearly 5 million of the nation's most polluting vehicles were quietly excluded from the popular "cash for clunkers" program after lobbyists for antique auto parts suppliers and car collectors persuaded the government to shut out cars built before 1984.

The restriction has prevented consumers nationwide who own older cars and trucks from cashing in on the \$3-billion federal program even though many don't consider their jalopies to be collectors' items.

When the federal government announced the rebates of up to \$4,500, Chris Hurst said, it looked like the perfect time to unload his gas-guzzling 1981 Ford F-150 pickup. Hurst, who lives in the Sierra foothills north of Fresno, was surprised to discover his truck was too old to qualify.

"If we could have gotten that rebate, it would have worked perfectly for us," said Hurst, who is now trying to sell the vehicle, equipped with Ford's biggest V-8 engine, for \$1,600.

The restrictions were pushed by lobbyists for the Specialty Equipment Market Assn., a Diamond Bar group that represents companies that sell parts and services to classic and antique car collectors. The group, as well as classic car enthusiasts, have opposed cash for clunkers because they don't want older vehicles to be destroyed.

When the proposals for a clunker buyback program surfaced early this year, the specialty equipment association opposed the entire concept because such a program could shrink the size of the market for aftermarket parts. The association eventually got lawmakers to adopt the age limit.

"We are very pleased that Congress was able to include that in the program," said Stuart Gosswein, director of regulatory affairs at the association.

The association represents more than 7,000 companies that make all manner of auto-related products,



including reproduction Model T tires and AMC Gremlin upholstery. The powerful interest group has won legislative battles nationwide to protect owners of classic cars and hot rods from laws covering vehicle noise, emissions tests and much else.

The cash-for-clunkers legislation was sponsored by Rep. Betty Sutton (D-Ohio) and Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.). Neither returned calls seeking comment. The final wording of the bill, including the provision requested by the interest group, was ironed out in a legislative conference committee and attached to a military spending bill.

Consumer and environmental groups reluctantly went along with the provision because they were fighting for any rule that would push consumers to buy more fuel-efficient vehicles than the ones they were trading in.

"I don't know that the program makes a whole lot of environmental sense," said Lena Pons, a policy analyst for Public Citizen, which pushed for tougher fuel-economy standards. "There is not a whole lot of justification for the classic car industry to block older vehicles from being traded in."

Other critics fault the age limit on economic grounds, saying it makes little sense even for collectors.

"If I own a 30-year-old Mustang, the value of my car goes up if others get destroyed," said Chris Edwards, an economist for the libertarian Cato Institute. "It is a typical industry loophole that doesn't protect the little guy, but does protect some special interest group."

Many Americans don't have the money to buy a new car, said Dan Baker, a part-time handyman and gardener in Greenville, S.C., who said he wished he could have gotten a rebate to upgrade to a better used vehicle.

"I'm the kind of person this program could have helped," he said.

Baker is trying to sell a brown 1980 Oldsmobile Cutlass SS with a broken air conditioner and rusty fenders for \$1,200.

"It's just an old car with 101,000 miles on it," said Baker, who hopes to join the ministry in the near future. "It is not a classic."

Groups representing salvage yards and service garages also derailed a provision in the bill that would have required the entire drivetrain of traded-in clunkers to be destroyed. Junkyards are now permitted to strip and resell all parts of the vehicles except the engines.

Other countries have instituted cash-for-clunkers programs, but they haven't placed restrictions that block older cars from being traded in.

Germany's version, which began in January, offered 2,500 euros (a little more than \$3,500) for any car older than nine years. Britain, Spain, France and several other European countries have instituted programs open to cars older than 10 years. Japan's program, instituted this spring, pays 250,000 yen (about \$2,600) for cars older than 13 years.

Proponents of the age limit argue that older vehicles not only represent a very small portion of the nation's overall automotive fleet, but also aren't driven very much and thus their tailpipe emissions don't contribute heavily to global warming.

There are 4.8 million vehicles older than 25 years on the road in the U.S. today, representing about 2% of all

registered vehicles, according to research from Experian Automotive. The percentage of old vehicles in California is even higher, nearly 3%, according to the California Department of Motor Vehicles. Data from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory suggests that vehicles are driven half as many miles annually after 10 years on the road as when new.

"Most guys I talk to drive their collector car 3,000 miles, tops," said Daniel Strohl, associate editor of the blog at Hemmings Motor News, a publication for auto enthusiasts that also called for the age limit. "The total amount of pollution from a very small pool of cars is really very minor."

State regulators sharply contradict that assertion. Experts at the California Air Resources Board say cars built before modern engine controls were fully developed in the 1980s are significantly dirtier than new cars.

For example, a 1965 Chevrolet Malibu, when new, produced 400 times the smog-forming pollutants that a new 2010 Malibu produces, said John Swanton, an air pollution specialist with the board. Thus, an old Malibu driven only 1,000 miles per year produces as much pollution as a new Malibu would in 400,000 miles.

A major reason is that cars made before the mid-1970s lacked catalytic converters. Yet many states, including California, exempt those very vehicles from smog control laws. Those loopholes are also the product of lobbying by the classic car industry.

Smog exemptions "are something we absolutely support," said Steve Moskowitz, executive director of the Antique Automobile Club of America. "These cars literally can't meet those standards," said Moskowitz, a former auto dealer who collects Oldsmobiles dating to 1903.

Older vehicles also are among the least fuel efficient. In 1975, the overall new-car fleet averaged just 13 mpg, according to government data, compared with 22 mpg in 1985.

And although some old cars are real classics, others are truly just clunkers, said Leslie Kendall, curator of the Petersen Automotive Museum.

"There are some 50-year-old cars that are only good for transportation," Kendall said.

Los Angeles attorney Chia Evers was excited about using cash for clunkers to buy a new hatchback, such as a Scion xA or a Nissan Cube.

But she was disappointed to discover that her 1973 Volkswagen Beetle was too old to qualify as a trade-in.

"I feel really guilty about the smog," said Evers, who recently started her own practice and doesn't have enough money to buy a new car without an incentive. "Driving old cars is fun, but the gas mileage is terrible."

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