

WASHINGTON -- U.S. automakers are taking their fuel economy case to Middle America, warning that too dramatic an increase in federal efficiency standards would cost billions and put jobs at risk if they were forced to stop making their biggest, most profitable models.

General Motors Corp., Ford Motor Co. and Chrysler LLC will hold rallies in downtown Chicago and St. Louis, beginning Thursday in the Windy City.

The automakers hope the grassroots effort will help beat back a proposal passed by the U.S. Senate earlier this year that would raise corporate average fuel economy mandates 40 percent to 35 miles per gallon for cars and trucks combined by 2020.

The rallies are aimed at building support for a measure sponsored by U.S. Reps. Baron Hill, D-Ind., and Lee Terry, R-Neb., that would hike CAFE mandates to 35 mpg for passenger cars by 2022 and at least 32 mpg for light trucks by 2022.

"The rallies give an outside-the-Beltway voice to our position that you can have improved fuel economy and protect jobs," said GM spokesman Greg A. Martin. "A balanced CAFE approach like Hill-Terry doesn't mean you have to choose between these two priorities."

Ford spokesman Alan Hall said the rallies are part of an effort "to educate people."

Hundreds of United Auto Workers members at Ford's South Side Chicago assembly plant and Chrysler's Belvidere, Ill., factory will attend a rally Thursday at Federal Plaza in Chicago.

They will present petitions signed by factory workers and others that will be delivered to local congressional offices, including the office of presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., who has sharply criticized Detroit automakers for not doing enough to improve fuel economy.

On Aug. 22, a similar rally with UAW members from all three Detroit automakers will be held in downtown St. Louis.

The unusual tactic comes after vigorous lobbying by the automakers won the backing of 163 members of the House for the Hill-Terry proposal.

The companies are frustrated that environmentalists have painted raising fuel economy mandates as cost-free, even suggesting they could boost employment by raising demand for more fuel-efficient models. "This is a bottom line, food-on-the-table concern for these workers," said John Bozzella, Chrysler's vice president for external affairs and public policy. "It's all about whether auto plants in the Chicago area will continue to operate."

Bozzella is quick to point out Chrysler's support for Hill-Terry -- a position that only a year ago would have been unthinkable. "It's not a question of if -- it's a question of how," he said.

Both rallies will feature local politicians. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Ill. and the mayor of Belvidere, Ill. will address the Chicago rally. Automakers plan to display a number of vehicles and will provide buses to bring UAW members to the rally. Automakers also invited a number of Chicago-area Democratic members of Congress who back the sharply higher fuel economy mandates. The rally will also feature users of large SUVs and trucks, such as construction workers, kids' sports' teams and volunteers who deliver meals to senior citizens, to talk about why large vehicles are essential.

Environmentalists, noting that gas prices in Chicago are the highest in the nation at \$3.15 a gallon, say automakers are using a tired tactic to play on people's fears "It's the kinder, gentler scare tactic that's based on misinformation to these UAW workers," said David Friedman, research director for the clean vehicle program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "Are they really telling these workers if fuel economy standards go up, they are going to shut down their plant?"

The rallies are the most public effort yet by automakers to boost grassroots support, but not the first.

Before the Senate vote in June to approve raising CAFE standards, GM held rallies at a half-dozen auto plants in several states and invited local media to cover them. Those rallies got little news coverage and many senators still voted to raise fuel economy.

Automakers also convinced several major corporations to back the Hill-Terry bill that had previously backed the more aggressive Senate proposal, including Dow Chemical and Auto Nation. In addition, the companies sent letters to retirees and employees urging them to contact their member of Congress.

The UAW has played a key role in convincing many Democrats and labor-friendly Republicans to support Hill-Terry. Several UAW officials will speak at the rallies.

Stephen Bainbridge, a law professor at the University of California in Los Angeles and an expert on grassroots lobbying, said automakers are facing an uphill climb.

"The auto industry has a credibility problem with the general public and legislators and they aren't getting the echo-chamber effect as they raise the alarm about higher fuel economy requirements," Bainbridge said.

But Jerry Roper, president of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, who will address Thursday's rally, said Hill-Terry is a "common-sense reasonable alternative."

That message hasn't reached the public, Roper said. "You need to raise the static."

