

MUNCIE -- For the first time since becoming a congressman in 2000, Mike Pence is supporting legislation requiring manufacturers to increase the fuel-economy of cars, light trucks and sport utility vehicles.

"I am persuaded it would be in the interest of energy independence, the environment and Hoosier jobs to support the Hill-Terry bill," Pence said in an interview.

The current fuel-economy standard for passenger cars has remained at 27.5 miles per gallon since 1990. The standard for model year 2007 light trucks is 22.2 mpg.

Pence agreed to co-sponsor a bill authored by Rep. Baron Hill, D-Ind., and Lee Terry, R-Neb., that would boost standards to between 32 mpg and 35 mpg and keep in place separate standards for cars and trucks.

The automobile industry has endorsed Hill-Terry.

A Republican, Pence said he drives a mid-size SUV -- a Ford Explorer. "It has 120,00 miles on it and the windows don't work, but it runs like a top," he said. "When my son turns 16, he'll drive it around because it's pretty big and pretty safe."

Higher standards passed by the Senate would force auto makers to significantly downsize vehicles to those that carry less cargo and fewer people, the auto industry says. The Senate package also threatens the safety and diversity of

American vehicles, some of which could be eliminated, and others of which would cost more as hybrids or diesels, according to auto dealers.

The Senate standard, which House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., supports, would establish a 35 mpg combined standard for cars and trucks.

Proponents say higher fuel-economy standards will save millions of barrels of oil a day and reduce global-warming emissions.

According to environmental groups such as the National Wildlife Federation, fuel-economy standards have not been seriously updated since the era of the 8-track tape player.

"I came to the conclusion that this Congress, with a new (Democratic) majority, was going to take fuel-economy standards in, so my decision to support the Hill-Terry bill is an effort to say if we need to prescribe new standards, we ought to do it at a level that will not burden American auto workers or American consumers," Pence said. "Fuel-economy standards represent the potential to be real job killers because they can force additional costs onto larger vehicles."

Pence says he will continue to support more domestic oil production through offshore drilling and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

"Fuel-economy alone will never achieve energy independence," he said.

In an interview, Marty Murphy, executive vice president of the Auto Dealers Association of Indiana, said, "If manufacturers have to meet the original deadline passed out of the Senate, you may effectively do away with big trucks. We dealers and the manufacturers are not opposing higher standards, it's how to do it

that we're haggling over."

Murphy has seven kids. He said he couldn't fit them in any vehicle with less than three seats.

Big vehicles are necessary for family vacations and pulling boats, campers, horse trailers and "all that kind of stuff," Murphy said.

"Right now, I'm not sure we can make an engine that gets over 30 mpg that can still haul eight people," Murphy said. "Look how many trucks and SUVs are around. That's what the public likes to drive."

If fuel-economy standards are raised too high, the types of big vehicles that could be downsized or eliminated include the Ford Expedition, the Lincoln Navigator, the Chevy Tahoe and Suburban and the Cadillac Escalade, Muncie auto dealers said.

Eight of Indiana's new car dealers, including Kevin Kahlo of Knightstown, traveled recently to Washington to lobby for the Hill-Terry bill.

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