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With clean car rules at stake, Trump's EPA chief accuses California leader Mary Nichols of lying!

The tensions between California and Trump administration environmental officials spilled into the open Thursday in a remarkably personal way. In a letter to members of Congress, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler accused California Air Resources Board Chair Mary Nichols of lying to them about the nature of their negotiations over California's fuel economy standards, which the Trump administration is trying to preempt.

Wheeler wrote members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee that it was "false" to claim that Nichols "operated as a good faith actor," in California's negotiations with the Trump administration over emissions standards for new cars. And he blamed the failed talks on "California's lack of effort." Wheeler was responding to Nichols prepared testimony, submitted to the House ahead of Thursday's hearing on the administration's proposal to roll back Obama-era emissions standards, in which she claimed, "the oil industry drove this action." The administration's proposal would also revoke the waiver California received under the 1970 Clean Air Act, allowing the state to set fuel economy standards that are stricter than the federal government's.

"We have been open to accommodations," Nichols wrote in her prepared remarks. But "the Trump administration has been unwilling to find a way that works. Their claim that California offered no counterproposal is false. They unilaterally decided to cut off conversations."

Wheeler, however, wrote in his letter that several parts of Nichols' testimony were false and said the fact that "California was cut out of the development of this proposal was her own doing." He also wrote that Nichols' "conspiracy theories that 'the oil industry drove this action' ... are beneath the responsibilities of the substantial position she holds."

"If we hear Mary Nichols on the next panel say she's willing to go to the table, will you commit to resume discussion immediately on a compromise, yes or no?" Dingell asked EPA Assistant Administrator William Wehrum and National Highway Safety Transportation Deputy Administrator Heidi King. Neither Wehrum or King would commit to that. "I don't know whether that would actually achieve the goal," said King.

The finger pointing comes as the EPA is preparing to finalize its proposed regulation. Officials from the EPA and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration wouldn't confirm at Thursday's hearing that the administration intends to move forward with its plan to revoke the waiver. "No decision has been made yet," Wehrum told lawmakers. But they are widely expected to move forward with that plan, something the growing acrimony between the state and federal negotiators only reinforces.

That could cost California billions in federal transportation funding, Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, warned at Thursday's hearing. "Under the Clean Air Act, federally funded transportation projects must demonstrate that they meet air quality goals," she said. Reducing California's emission standards means the state "would be compromised in their ability to meet federal air quality standards."



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Wehrum, however, denied that was a foregone conclusion. He told Matsui that while the California Air Resources Board has suggested “this is going to create a great problem,” a recent letter they submitted to the EPA doesn’t “conclude that it does.” California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Attorney General Xavier Becerra have already indicated they will sue to protect California’s standards and its waiver authority, setting up what could be years of conflicting mandates for carmakers.

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