

VW emissions fixing: All major carmakers distorting results, says leading NGO

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Volkswagen scandal an example of growing gap between manufacturers' claims and actual vehicle performance.



The gap between what manufacturers say their cars' emissions and fuel economy results are and the actual real-world performance of those same cars has risen from eight to 40 per cent in just over a decade, according to a leading EU environmental NGO.

While Volkswagen have hit the headlines as the first manufacturer to be embroiled by the emissions fixing scandal, the Brussels-based campaign group - Transport & Environment (T&E) - say that many other companies are now suspected of manipulating their test results.

Other alleged culprits include Peugeot, General Motors and BMW. In its report, T&E says, "in the past two to three years, all major carmakers - with the possible exception of Fiat - have become adept at using flexibilities in the tests, such that all carmakers now have an average gap of 25 per cent or

more."

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Commenting, the group's clean vehicles manager Greg Archer said, "the Volkswagen scandal was just the tip of the iceberg and what lies beneath is widespread abuse by carmakers of testing rules."

Unsurprisingly, warn T&E, these gaps in claimed and actual performance are undercutting EU rules to reduce CO2 emissions and hindering efforts to reach EU emissions reduction targets by 2030. According to the report, the distorted test results will add "1.5bn tonnes of CO2 to the atmosphere by 2030, [...] increasing the prospect of dangerous and uncontrollable climate change."

And this is not just damaging to people's health, warns Archer, it's also hurting Europe's economy. "Distorted test results deceive drivers, who achieve much poorer fuel economy than is promised in glossy marketing materials, costing a typical motorist around €450 a year in additional fuel costs compared to what might be expected from official test results."

This, Archer argues, means that, "the rest of the EU economy is being held back because of extra expenditures; this is money people could have spent on going out, for example."

The report also warns that, "By 2030, the widening gap will require drivers to cumulatively spend €1 trillion more on fuel". Archer added that, "the problem will get worse because manufacturers will find new ways to manipulate tests."

He said that currently, "tests are performed largely in a lab and are poorly specified so manufacturers can use loopholes to artificially lower results, for example by charging the battery externally so the car engine won't come under any load, making sure the settings on the rolling road are beneficial, using specially prepared tyres and adjusting the brakes."

Additionally, current testing rules allow carmakers to lower their actual test results by four per cent. This is intended to minimise the testing burden, but is in fact used routinely as a way to publish lower results.

There have been strong calls for EU policymakers to investigate the scandal and to start the process of devising stricter testing rules.

Krišjānis Kariņš, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group spokesman in Parliament's industry, research and energy committee said, "not only VW, but also other car manufacturers have suffered a huge loss of credibility, which could have serious repercussions for the reputation of European industry. The sector has to repair the damage as quickly as possible."

He and his colleague group colleague, German deputy Peter Liese, underlined in a statement that, "the proper implementation of car legislation is also of crucial importance to our municipalities,

because they have to comply with EU air quality standards, which they cannot do if cars are emitting more than they should."

Meanwhile Miriam Dalli, from the centre-left Socialist & Democrats (S&D) group said, "[EU] legislation must be based on reality, so that we avoid fiascos such as the Volkswagen one. This is why we strongly call for real driving emissions tests, which would be stringent and implemented as soon as possible, while making sure that no loopholes exist for car manufacturers to circumvent their responsibilities."

Catherine Bearder, Parliament's Alliance of Liberal and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group shadow rapporteur for the EU's new air quality law, commented, "We need to tighten EU emission standards and make sure they are properly enforced. Unless we take action, thousands of lives will continue to be tragically cut short by air pollution."

Her Greens/EFA group counterpart Bas Eickhout stressed that, "air pollution is a silent but prolific killer in Europe, and we need to ensure watertight rules to address this problem at its main source, which includes road vehicles at the top end of the list."

"We cannot put the short-term profits of the car industry ahead of public health and the impact air pollution has on our health systems and national budgets. Ultimately, it is up to national authorities to ensure car manufacturers do not cheat."

Volkswagen hit the headlines again today (Monday), following reports that German prosecutors are launching a criminal investigation into the car manufacturer's former CEO, Martin Winterkorn.

About the author

Julie Levy-Abegnoli is a journalist and editorial assistant for the Parliament Magazine

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[Health](#) [6]

[Transport](#) [7]

Categories

[Business and industry](#) [8]

[Environment](#) [9]



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