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A loophole for dirty diesel trucks: Yet another attack on science by Trump’s EPA

By THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD
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A view of traffic on the 710 Freeway in Long Beach. (Los Angeles Times)



It's bad enough that Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt wants to reopen a loophole that allows truckers to drive rebuilt rigs with dirty diesel engines that spew as much as 450 times more soot than new models. But now it turns out that Pruitt justified his plan with a questionable, company-funded study that is under investigation for "research misconduct."

Pruitt has spent the last year attacking the EPA's mission and undermining its integrity. He's bucked his own scientists' research in making decisions to weaken environmental rules. He's sought to stack EPA advisory boards with industry representatives.



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Yet this dirty truck loophole is a particularly egregious example of how Pruitt is willing to ignore legitimate research — and overwhelming industry opinion — in favor of dubious analysis that supports his desire to roll back pollution rules to benefit politically connected special interests.

At issue are so-called glider kits, which have typically been used to give new life to engines and other components salvaged from trucks damaged in collisions. During the Obama administration, the EPA had sought to phase out these trucks after discovering that some companies were circumventing truck emissions standards by putting older, dirtier engines inside new truck shells. Last year, however, Pruitt proposed to exempt gliders from contemporary emission limits



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The vehicles look brand-new but cost 25% less to buy without the pollution controls required on newer trucks. EPA researchers found that gliders can emit up to 450 times more diesel soot and 40 times more smog-forming emissions than new trucks on the market. Agency staff also estimated the glider trucks produce enough soot each year to cause up to 1,600 premature deaths.



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Yet Pruitt has justified the rollback in part by citing a study from Tennessee Tech University that declared glider trucks to be no more harmful to air quality than trucks with new engines. Turns out the study was funded by Fitzgerald Glider Kits, which happens to be one of the primary manufacturers of glider trucks.

According to The Times' Evan Halper, the study was run by a Tennessee Tech vice president with no graduate-level engineering training, and the research was conducted at a Fitzgerald-owned facility. The owner of the company, Tommy Fitzgerald, hosted a campaign event in 2016 for then-candidate Donald Trump, and he has met privately with Pruitt.

After faculty raised concern about the legitimacy of the study, Tennessee Tech

opened an investigation, telling Halper, "The university takes the allegations of research misconduct seriously." The university has asked the EPA to stop using or referring to the study pending the completion of the investigation.

There's an extra special contradiction to Pruitt's embrace of the Tennessee Tech study. In the name of "transparency," Pruitt has proposed a rule requiring the EPA to consider only studies for which the underlying data are made public. The rule, which has been pushed by industry groups for years, would block the EPA from considering studies about the health impacts of pollutants that are based on the private medical records of individuals. But it could also apply to the questionable glider truck study because Fitzgerald's company is refusing to publicly release the full study, which it owns under its arrangement with the university.

In the meantime, two former EPA chiefs — one who served under a Democratic administration and one who served under a Republican administration — sent a letter to Pruitt expressing concern that the agency had "failed to rely on the best scientific analysis" in the proposed glider truck exemption.

And members of Congress from both parties have fired off letters to the EPA, complaining that the rollback for glider trucks was a bad idea. The broader trucking industry has opposed the loophole too, arguing that it hurts truckers and truck manufacturers that have played by the rules and invested in more expensive pollution control equipment.

Indeed, the California Trucking Assn. is so concerned about an unlevel playing field that it sponsored legislation calling for a \$25,000 fine for truckers who drive a glider truck that violates California's strict air pollution controls. AB 2564 sailed through the Assembly with near unanimous support from Republicans and Democrats. State officials estimate that if just 7% of trucks on California roads are soot-belching gliders, it would entirely offset the clean-air benefits of the state's diesel regulations.

It's a rare day in American politics when there is such widespread, bipartisan support for a pollution control measure. Science, reason and consensus are all on the side of closing the dirty truck loophole once and for all. And then there's Pruitt on the other side.

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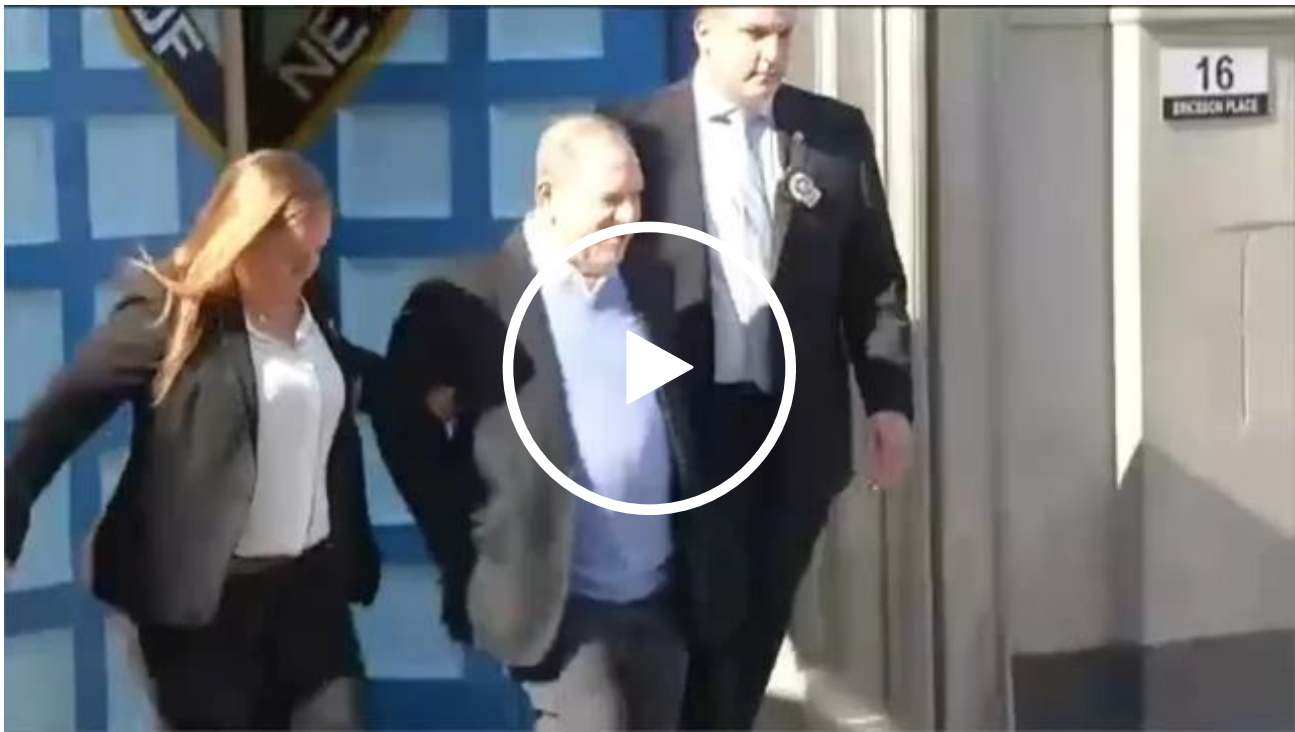
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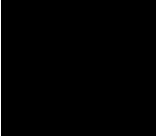
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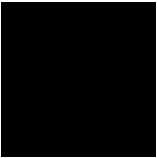


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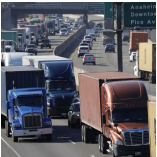
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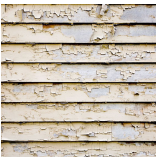
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