

Let the sun shine in

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Give us some strong CAFE and let the sunshine in.

Energy policy isn't always mind-numbingly complex. As the U.S. Senate and House work out a compromise energy bill, they should take two straightforward steps to make the future a lot brighter for Arizona and the entire country:

ÉIncrease fuel-efficiency standards for cars.

ÉExtend the tax incentives for solar power.

This powerful combination would help reduce America's dependence on imported oil, diversify our sources of electricity, clean the air and save money.

Congress adopted fuel-efficiency standards, known as Corporate Average Fuel Economy or CAFE, in 1975.

It was just common sense: The fastest, easiest way to shrink our reliance on foreign oil was to reduce overall consumption.

Yet we haven't raised the bar in more than 20 years. And now, more than ever, America is "addicted to oil," as President Bush put it.

The Senate energy bill would require manufacturers to achieve 35 miles per gallon, averaged across their entire fleet of vehicles, by 2020.

That's a 40 percent increase from the current levels, and it eliminates a loophole that allows significantly lower fuel economy for light trucks and SUVs.

The payoff: By 2020, we would reduce oil consumption by 1.2 million barrels a day. Drivers would save \$25 billion a year, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists (and that's based on gasoline at \$2.55 a gallon).

The reductions in emission of greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming, would be the equivalent of taking 34 million vehicles off the road.

What a combination! But the House bill, after intense lobbying from automakers and heavy-hitting Michigan Democrat John Dingell, didn't touch fuel economy. Now, the auto industry is

pushing its own watered-down standards.

Yet, scientists say, the Senate requirements can be met with existing technology. Will this hurt Detroit?

Well, U.S. automakers have resisted producing more-efficient vehicles on their own - leaving the field open for foreign manufacturers to grab market share.

Fortunately, both sides of Congress recognize that we must extend and expand the existing incentives for solar. Besides providing a clean source of electricity, solar has the potential for reducing the need for new transmission lines and helping stabilize prices by diversifying our power sources.

For sunny Arizona, solar also holds potential for economic development.

The solar industry is gathering momentum around the world, including in such unexpected places as Germany.

But everywhere, the fledgling field requires some initial support while it gains the economies of scale.

And, of course, solar is competing with established sources of energy that still receive massive tax breaks and other subsidies. Efforts to scale back support for the oil and gas industry, which is raking in huge profits, have gained little ground.

The U.S. solar industry should have the assurance that tax incentives will last long enough to justify investments. Between them, the House and Senate bills have reasonable provisions, including an eight-year extension of the business investment-tax credit for solar and a six-year extension of the residential one.

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, a Tucson Democrat, is playing a strong role in pushing solar. She has introduced a bill that includes extending solar tax credits, which could be part of a backup strategy if the massive energy legislation stalls.

For the moment, there seems to be movement, in the usual herky-jerky way, to getting an energy bill through Congress. It should come with healthy jolt of CAFE and a lot of sunshine