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Government's Electric Car Business Offers New Opportunity for Bungling

CONGRESS has overridden President Ford's veto to enact a law putting the government in the electric automobile business.

The law's apparent intent is to promote development of battery-powered vehicles by public or private interests, funded by grants (\$160 million) or loan guarantees (\$60 million), administered by the Energy Research and Development Administration.

This approach might be expected to function with efficiency comparable to that of the Postal Service and with profitability about like that of Amtrak and ConRail. Public enthusiasm for Congress-built cars may reach the height of acceptance now enjoyed by the federal speed limit of 55 m.p.h.

The first 7,500 electric cars to be built are to be allocated to government agencies, presumably after they are put together under Occupational Safety and Health standards, Equal Opportunity Employment, minimum wage and minimum work laws, and will meet Environmental Protection Agency regulations.

The three stages of the program specify that within one year, ERDA must develop "baseline data" on the state of the art of electric cars and combination engine cars.

In the next stage, ERDA is to issue performance standards and contract to buy as many as 2,500 of the vehicles.

The third stage, within four years, calls for revised standards of performance for cars that represent significant improvement," and ERDA will contract to buy 5,000 advanced cars.

The U.S. Postal Service, General Services Administration, Defense Department and other federal agencies will be required to use electric vehicles. If they prove to be uneconomical, no matter; ERDA is to pay the extra cost and keep them running. The Treasury can borrow the money, if necessary.

The law does not require private businesses or individuals to buy and use electric cars. At least, not yet.

Can ERDA be expected to deliver skills and technology needed to design and build a new concept of motor vehicles? The law takes care of that. It provides that ERDA will employ "the unique competence" of the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) in carrying out the build-a-car mandate.

Private enterprise companies and inventors have been trying to develop practical electric cars for decades, with only limited success. Some are in use, but they are restricted for size, distance, speed, power and capacity of payload.

Sponsors of the legislation said that it is aimed to serve the second-car market, estimating that it amounts to about 40 per cent of the automobiles on the road.

It also is intended to alleviate the fuel shortage faced by internal combustion engine users. It was not explained what might happen to our electric supply system if the goal set is reached. Backers of the law expressed hope that 10 million cars would be plugging in on electric charging devices by 1990.

Someone has defined a camel as a horse constructed by a committee. The modern parallel might turn out to be an automobile designed by Congress and built by bureaucrats.