

WASHINGTON -- It had taken weeks of hardball negotiations, but by Sunday afternoon White House officials thought everything was falling into place. In less than 48 hours they would unveil a landmark deal with U.S. automakers to impose sharply higher fuel efficiency standards on new cars and trucks.

Then, at 3 p.m., the telephone rang.

A senior executive from Ford was calling. The company had run the numbers again and concluded it might not survive if it accepted the deal. And if Ford pulled out, it would be a major setback -- perhaps the death knell -- for what promised to be a major step forward on two of President Barack Obama's signature goals: combating global warming and reducing the nation's appetite for foreign oil.

In the end, with more number crunching and White House pressure, Ford did not bolt. And when Obama stepped into the sunlit Rose Garden on Tuesday afternoon to announce the deal with the auto industry and the state of California, he hailed it as a "template" for progress on other knotty issues.

Yet the near-collapse of the effort only two days before the scheduled announcement was a dramatic reminder of just how hard it can be to break through years of stalemate and build a consensus for action on a problem that has long pitted some of the country's most powerful interests against each other.

In the last-minute push to keep Ford on board, a key official helped map strategy while huddled with a cell phone in a bathroom at the Washington Nationals' baseball stadium. Another broke away from a birthday party in New York.

What ultimately made the agreement possible, according to officials closely involved in the process, was a combination of unyielding demands by the government on some points and a willingness to make major concessions on what it considered smaller ones.

Also contributing to the successful negotiations were an auto industry and its major union driven to the brink of collapse by the economic crisis, a president with soaring approval ratings and a sense among industry leaders that action no longer could be forestalled and they would be better off with a single national rule than a state-by-state patchwork system.

"Everybody at some point, from California to the companies, had a moment of going, uh-oh, what am I thinking?" said Carol Browner, director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy.

"We were able to convince everybody to keep their eye on the ball, a national standard, and work on the way we get there," Browner said.

A Ford spokesman said the company "worked closely with the administration to make sure we understood the agreement."

The deal unveiled at the White House on Tuesday will lead to a single nationwide standard requiring a 30 percent reduction in carbon dioxide and other emissions from vehicles sold in the United States by 2016.

To meet that standard, according to the White House, new vehicles sold in the U.S. will average 35.5 miles per gallon in 2016, up from 25 m.p.g. today. The agreement, coupled with increased fuel-efficiency requirements that Congress approved in 2007, would add \$1,300 to the price of a new car in 2016, the administration estimated.

The plan does not spell out specific mileage requirements, but capping the greenhouse gas emissions that scientists blame for global warming would effectively require better mileage.

California, which had sought to impose tougher emissions standards on its own, essentially agreed to accept the national standard. The Obama plan would achieve comparable cutbacks while giving automakers more time to adapt.

For their part, the automakers will drop their legal challenges to California's plan.

The new limits are projected to reduce U.S. oil consumption by about 5 percent a year from 2011 to 2016. The nation currently uses about 7.1 billion barrels a year.

Many Republicans criticized the agreement, saying it will kill jobs, raise car prices and reduce consumer choices. **Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.) said automakers signed on "because they're owned by the government" -- a reference to Obama's moves to prop up troubled Chrysler and General Motors.**

**"These exact companies were fighting this -- all of them -- tooth and nail six months ago, and now suddenly they love it?" Campbell said. "No, they don't love it. This is what this administration is doing. This administration is autocratically forcing people to do whatever it wants."**

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican and a high-profile supporter of the agreement, suggested Tuesday that the federal assistance gave Obama's team leverage to force automakers to accept the emissions limits.

"All of a sudden the car manufacturers needed money, need the taxpayers' money, need the federal government to help them," he said. "So in order to get that help I'm sure that President Obama said, 'OK, we're going to give you the help. Here's what you need to do.' "