A Letter from Dan Sperling, August 2012

I am an eternal optimist, and sometimes I am rewarded.

I could dwell on the failure of international climate initiatives, the decay of U.S. transportation infrastructure, and general government dysfunction around the globe. But a lot of good is happening these days. Most remarkable is the U-turn by the global automotive industry. After the U.S. automakers suffered near-death experiences and Toyota lost money for the first time in 70 years, something profound happened: Automakers embraced energy efficiency and, to a lesser extent, electric vehicles.

My 2009 book, Two Billion Cars, was motivated by total frustration over the U.S. automotive industry’s aggressive opposition to tougher fuel-economy standards. From the early 1990s all the way to 2007, the industry fought every effort to improve energy efficiency, with lawsuits, lobbying and advertising. Incredibly, U.S. fuel-economy standards of 27.5 mpg remained frozen for 20 years.

Now the industry embraces a 54 mpg standard that will cut fuel consumption (and greenhouse gas emissions) of new cars and trucks in half between 2010 and 2025. On top of that, they support a dramatic ramping up of “zero emission” vehicles to 15 percent of new car sales in California by 2025. One automotive executive, echoing several others, recently confided to me his relief and satisfaction in finally being part of the solution.

The urban sprawl story is also positive, though less so. In the U.S., we are seeing a strengthening commitment to urban livability and a slow decline in vehicle use, led by young people who are buying fewer vehicles and driving less than their parents (controlling for the recent economic downturn).

The fuels challenge is perhaps the most difficult of all. Investments in biofuels are faltering, hydrogen remains just over the horizon, and increasing amounts of dirtier high-carbon “unconventional” oil are coming on the market. Clean-fuel policies in Washington, D.C., and California are under attack.

Through it all, I am proud to say that ITS-Davis researchers, supported by a superb staff, are playing hugely important roles in addressing these vehicle, fuels, and mobility challenges.

We now have over 130 graduate students affiliated with ITS-Davis and over 60 faculty and technical staff working with them on a vast number of projects. Their work is not sitting on the proverbial shelf. They are funded by most of the major international car and oil companies and almost every major government agency in the U.S. concerned with these issues.

This level of engagement and support is unmatched. And we are delivering.

Our researchers are leading the way in developing a transformational national Low Carbon Fuel Standard and supporting the development of national 54 mpg vehicle standards. In California, we are playing pivotal roles in designing and analyzing initiatives on zero emission vehicles, low
carbon fuels, vehicle use and sprawl. We are unraveling the mysteries of consumer behavior, developing and analyzing new technologies, and creating the tools needed by government and industry. We play essential roles in determining how best to direct our transportation system to a more sustainable future.

Perhaps most rewarding is our growing cohort of alumni who are becoming leaders in government and industry. In the end, they are our most important products. They are the ones we will depend upon to guide our transportation and energy systems through difficult and uncertain times.

There is plenty to despair of. But there is also much to praise and embrace. It is our responsibility to build the knowledge and science for a better future. We are up to it. We continue to strengthen our core programs and will continue to launch new initiatives. Stay tuned.