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DETROIT — General Motors is going after what was a sacred cow in auto marketing: motorsports.

GM (GM) says it will cut back motorsports advertising, putting in jeopardy its sponsorships of teams, tracks and all the ancillary marketing that goes with racing.

Expected among the biggest losers is NASCAR-related spending of an estimated \$120 million to \$140 million a year.

Last week, GM announced a program of "self help" to save and raise cash needed to survive the current car market downturn. The \$15 billion plan through 2009 includes cutting salaried jobs, slashing production, eliminating the dividend and trimming marketing budgets, which include race promotion.

"Like all areas of the business, these areas have not gone without a certain level of scrutiny, and there will be modifications and changes in our promotional footprint," Troy Clarke, president of GM North America, said in a conference call on the plan. "We're not going to talk about the details today, and specifically NASCAR, but all those areas have been reviewed and will continue to be as we work these action plans through."

One consideration may have been that NASCAR began a transition in 2007 to a so-called Car of Tomorrow. In place of body shapes loosely based on a carmaker's product, all race cars would have the same generic body, differentiated with stickers depicting headlights, taillights and grille, as well as the car number and source of the engine. The goals were safety, lower costs for race teams and an even playing field for drivers.

But it's also taken some of the pizzazz out of racing, says Peter De Lorenzo, editor of AutoExtremist.com and a consultant to some automakers. And in severe financial times, promoting something so unrelated to actual products GM sells doesn't make sense, he says.

"NASCAR was more effective ... when there was some sort of product identification and connection to the manufacturers," De Lorenzo said. "There's been resistance to taking a hard look at what they're spending, but now they're really giving it intense scrutiny."

Racetrack owners now are scrambling to hammer out new contracts, hoping to replace some GM corporate money with ad support from local dealers.

NASCAR spokesman Ramsey Poston says he's confident GM will continue to see NASCAR as an important advertising investment.

"Obviously, they're hugely a part of our sport and our industry," he says. "Hopefully they'll continue to recognize that the power of our fan base is that they are direct customers of theirs."

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