California passes new auto emission rules

By Jason Dearen, Associated Press
In the Fresno Bee and other papers, Friday, Jan. 27, 2012

SAN FRANCISCO -- Seeking to influence other states and Washington, California air regulators passed sweeping auto emission standards Friday that include a mandate to have 1.4 million electric and hybrid vehicles on state roads by 2025.

The California Air Resources Board unanimously approved the new rules that require that one in seven of the new cars sold in the state in 2025 be an electric or other zero-emission vehicle.

The plan also mandates a 75 percent reduction in smog-forming pollutants by 2025, and a 50 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from today's standards.

Automakers worked with the board and federal regulators on the greenhouse gas mandates in an effort to create one national standard for those pollutants.

"Today's vote ... represents a new chapter for clean cars in California and in the nation as a whole," said Mary Nichols, the board's chairman. "Californians have always loved their cars. We buy a lot of them and drive them. Now we will have cleaner and more efficient cars to love."

California's auto emissions standards are influential and often more strict than federal rules. The state began passing regulations for cleaner cars in the 1960s to help ease some of the world's worst smog, and has since helped spur the auto industry's innovations in emissions-control technology.

Currently 14 other states - including New York, Washington and Massachusetts - have adopted California's smog emissions rules as their own.

California has also previously set zero-emissions vehicle mandates, which 10 other states have also currently adopted.

Companies including Ford Motor Corp., Chrysler Group LLC, General Motors Co., Nissan Motor Co. Ltd. and others submitted testimony Thursday supportive of the new standards.

Some of the companies protested the inclusion of a system that will give some automakers credit toward their zero-emission vehicle mandate for exceeding federal greenhouse gas emissions standards in other cars. These credits, which can be used to reduce the number of clean vehicles made, can be used from 2018-2021.

Some called it a loophole that will take hundreds of thousands of clean cars off the road, hurting the emerging market for these vehicles.

"This is a temporary way station," Nichols said about the credits. "But by 2021 all companies will be producing the full complement of zero-emission vehicles."

Trade groups representing auto dealers worried that the new regulations would increase the costs of vehicles for consumers and stifle the industry's growth.

The California New Car Dealers Association and other industry groups representing those who sell cars said the board is overestimating consumer demand for electric vehicles and other so-called "zero-emission vehicles."

Dealers are concerned that the regulations will lead to higher costs in all cars, and say consumers have been slow to warm to electric and other zero-emission vehicles.

Board member Sandra Berg, who said she drives the all-electric Nissan Leaf, said before the vote that regulators need to take consumer behavior and choice seriously in this equation.

She said a lot of work must be done to educate dealers to sell the new generation of cars.

"Early adopters (of electric cars) are willing to go without heat to save the miles they need to get to their destination, but that is not going to help grow the consumer base," Berg said, referring to the range issues with some current electric vehicles.

The board's research staff disputes the argument from dealers that the mandates for new technology will increase costs for cars. They point to steady increases in hybrid and other sales and argue that fuel cost savings will make up for any vehicle price increase.

"Our research shows a $1,400 to $1,900 car price increase. But over the life of the vehicles, the owners save $6,000 in reduced fuel and maintenance costs," board spokesman David Clegern said.

One of the nation's foremost consumer groups, the Consumers' Union, the policy and advocacy division of Consumer Reports, supported the changes.

The rules will "protect consumers by encouraging the development of cleaner, more efficient cars that save families money, help reduce the American economy's vulnerability to oil price shocks and reduce harmful air pollution," according to a letter from the group.

California orders hike in number of super clean cars

The state's air board issues new rules to automakers as part of its effort to cut greenhouse gases.

By Bettina Boxall, staff writer
L.A. Times, Sat., Jan. 28, 2012

California, long a national leader in cutting auto pollution, pushed the envelope further Friday as state regulators approved rules to cut greenhouse gas emissions from cars and put significantly more pollution-free vehicles on the road in coming years.

The package of Air Resources Board regulations would require auto manufacturers to offer more zero- or very low-emission cars such as battery electric, hydrogen fuel cell and plug-in hybrid vehicles in California starting with model year 2018.

By 2025, one in seven new autos sold in California, or roughly 1.4 million, must be ultra-clean, moving what is now a driving novelty into the mainstream.

The board also strengthened future emission standards for all new cars, making them the toughest in the nation. The rules are intended by 2025 to slash smog-forming pollutants from new vehicles by 75 percent and reduce by a third their emissions that contribute to global warming.

"Today's vote … represents a new chapter for clean cars in California and in the nation as a whole," said Air Resources Board chairwoman Mary Nichols.

Auto manufacturers are uneasy with some of the provisions but generally support the package, which took three years to develop. "We know the board wants to push the automakers," said Mike Love, national regulatory affairs manager for Toyota Motor Sales. "We said we're willing to go along with you and do our best."

The requirements are expected to drive up car prices. The board staff predicts that the advanced technologies needed to meet the new standards will add $1,900 to the price of a new car in 2025. But that would be more than offset by $6,000 in estimated fuel savings over the life of the vehicle, according to the board's staff.

Zero-emission autos now make up a minuscule portion of the more than 26 million cars in California, with just a few hundred fuel cell cars and about 34,000 battery electric autos on the road.

"The fact that we are going to change what consumers can buy is one of the most important things we can do," board member Ken Yeager said before the panel, at the end of a two-day hearing in Los Angeles, voted 9 to 0 to approve the rules.

Manufacturers are poised to introduce a number of new electric and plug-in hybrid models. "This year, two dozen or more new vehicles are going to come out in the market," Love said. "Everyone is trying their idea for EVs (electric vehicles), plug-ins."

Nichols said she has seen "a real change in attitudes on the part of auto companies that have seen the handwriting on the wall.... The reality is that companies see the future is going to be in electric drivetrain vehicles. They're moving there as fast they can."

But automakers do still have concerns, particularly whether consumers will buy the ultra-clean cars.

"Automakers are mandated to build products that consumers are not mandated to buy," said Gloria Bergquist, a spokeswoman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which includes Chrysler Group, Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Co. "If the electric vehicle infrastructure is not in place, consumers may be reluctant to buy these technologies."

Jack Nerad, Kelley Blue Book market analyst, predicted that "the added expense and lesser versatility of the 'environmental' vehicles" will continue to make them less desirable to consumers. Manufacturers might have to sell clean cars at a loss to meet the requirements, and "buyers of conventional cars will pick up the remainder of the tab," he said. One of the most disputed elements of the rules centered on a clause that in the early years of the mandate gives credits to automakers who reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of their fleets more than required. Those credits would cut the number of electric, fuel cell and plug-in hybrids the companies had to offer in California.

Jay Friedland, legislative director of Plug In America, called it "a loophole you can drive a truck through" that will undermine the 2025 goal of having ultra-clean cars make up 15% of the new vehicles sold in the state.

A zero-emission mandate is not new in California. It dates from 1990 but was progressively watered down over the years.

The state's ambitious goals to slash its greenhouse gas production renewed focus on the role that super clean cars could play.

"The steady drumbeat of the need to get off the dependence on petroleum is really what is driving this," Nichols said. "It's taken longer than we've hoped."

Starting with model year 2015, automakers will have to meet tougher standards for smog-forming emissions and, in 2017, greater limits on pollutants that contribute to global warming.

By 2025, the standards are designed to reduce the average smog-forming emissions of new cars and light trucks by 75% compared with those sold today.

The greenhouse gas limits, which would be the same as the federal government has proposed for vehicles nationally, should cut those auto emissions by a third more in 2025 than required under current standards. To meet the new limits, the board staff anticipates the auto industry will make greater use of advanced hybrid technology, stronger and lighter materials and improved emission control equipment.

If oil companies don't reach an agreement with the state to voluntarily install alternative fueling stations, such as for hydrogen fuel cells, the new rules will also require them to do so when a certain number of cars using that fuel is reached. The outlets could be placed at an existing gasoline station or a free-standing site.

"I hope the oil industry will get on board rather than dragging its feet," said board member Hector De La Torre.

University of California group encourages farming efficiency

From the Fresno Bee
In the Modesto Bee, Monday, Jan. 30, 2012

CLOVIS -- Hoping to encourage the use of conservation practices, the University of California has launched an organization that could potentially save farmers time and money, and reduce their impact on the environment.

University officials, farmers, scientists and agriculture professionals gathered Friday in Clovis to outline the goals of the newly formed Conservation Agriculture Systems Institute.

About 100 people attended the meeting at the Veterans' Memorial Building.

Based out of the West Side Research and Extension Center in Five Points, the institute will help farmers understand conservation practices, including reduced tilling, the use of cover crops and center pivot irrigation.

Farmers using the practices say they have seen positive benefits.

Dino Giacomazzi, a Hanford dairy operator, said that by plowing less in his corn and wheat fields, he has improved the quality of his soil and reduced his costs.

"It holds water and nutrients better, and I end up using less fertilizer and less water," Giacomazzi said. "And by using the tractor less, we are reducing diesel emission particulates."

Research trials studying reduced tillage in processing tomatoes and cotton have also shown increased yields, said Dan Munk, a UC cooperative extension farm adviser.

Jeff Mitchell, a UC cooperative extension cropping systems specialist, is a longtime advocate of reduced tillage and conservation systems. He said the U.S. is behind the rest of the world in adopting these practices. But that could change as farmers face regulation.

"We are going to face increased demands to produce more in a way that is less damaging to the environment," Mitchell said.

To further its goals, the institute will create an awareness campaign aimed at the general public, private business and environmental groups. It will also continue to study the best available practices and make that information available to farmers.

Stockton Record editorial, Monday, Jan. 30, 2012:

Will EPA stay course?

The federal Environmental Protection Agency, which has been longer on rules than protection, discovered the Valley last week.

EPA Regional Administrator Jered Blumenfeld rolled through the Valley for a series of photo-op stops to tout the agency's newfound interest in cleaning up some of the nation's worst polluted air.

"Four times more people die in the San Joaquin Valley from air pollution than they do from traffic fatalities," said Blumenfeld, who heads the EPA's San Francisco office.

That wasn't exactly a news flash to Valley residents. What was: A down payment on solving that problem - $5 million - that will be sprinkled around the Valley to buy cleaner-operating locomotives, including one that will chug between the Port of Stockton and Lodi.

That $5 million won't go far given that estimates figure it will take about $3 billion over the next 10 to 15 years for the Valley to meet clean air standards. But local officials are just happy the San Francisco-based EPA officials have discovered there's a choking valley east of the coastal mountains.

"They are going to be a player in this, as opposed to just an oversight big brother that doesn't have a stake in what's going on here," said Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

It remains to be seen if the regional agency officials remain interested and keep the money coming. Or they could just retreat to the comfortable, pollution-free confines of their San Francisco offices and simply issue more regulatory missives.

Actions speak louder than photo-ops.