

California Readies Rules to Allow Testing of Driverless Vehicles

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- Department of Motor Vehicles issues draft rules on testing
- Rules recognize federal authority over safety and enforcement of vehicle standards

By Carolyn Whetzel

(BNA) -- Newly proposed California regulations offer a path for testing driverless cars on public roads. The draft regulations would expand the state's existing autonomous vehicle testing program to keep pace with the rapid development of the technology, the Department of Motor Vehicles said. The newly proposed rules would not require a human in the car, a change from the current rules.

The agency has scheduled an April 25 public hearing on the draft rules. Written comments will be accepted through April 24.

Released by the Department of Motor Vehicles on March 10, the proposed regulations aim to address public safety concerns and will require manufacturers certify their vehicles meet federal motor vehicle safety rules and guidelines. An approved exemption from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) or a federal law would be needed to test unconventionally designed cars, according to the draft rules.

Other provisions of the proposed regulations address driver licensing and responsibility, vehicle registration and advertising autonomous vehicles.

The draft rules make it clear that NHTSA, which released its automated vehicles policy in September, has authority to develop and enforce vehicle safety standards.

California First In Adopting Rules

California was among the first states to pass autonomous vehicle legislation, Dan Gage, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, told Bloomberg BNA in a March 14 email.

“The Alliance is currently tracking 69 bills or regulatory efforts concerning autonomous vehicle technologies in 27 states,” Gage said.

The California Department of Motor Vehicles is considered a partner in “expediting these transformative technologies to market and building consumer acceptance,” the industry group said in a written statement. The group said it is conducting a complete review of the proposal.

Tesla Motors Inc., Ford Motor Co., Nissan Motor Co., Honda Motor Co., Alphabet Inc.'s Google, Volkswagen AG and Baidu Inc., are among the 23 manufacturers on the list of approved participants for the California testing program.

Autonomous Vehicle Benefits

“With federal statistics confirming that 94 percent of all crashes involve driver error, getting more of these new technologies on our roads will help keep drivers safer, while also helping to avoid traffic congestion, reduce fuel use and save time and money,” Gage said.

Autonomous vehicle technologies also can reduce emissions from idling cars and help develop a more seamless transportation system, Gage said.

Environmental Benefits Uncertain

The emission reduction benefits of the deployment of autonomous vehicles is uncertain, **Dan Sperling, director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California, Davis, told Bloomberg BNA March 14.**

“They could have a very positive effect and huge negative effect as well,” Sperling said. Much depends on the market demand and public policy, he said.

“The really, really big question is can most of the vehicles be used in a sharing type service or mobility services as opposed to individually owned,” Sperling said. “Vehicle miles traveled would increase” if the number of individually owned cars is substantial, he said.

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For More Information

California's proposed regulations for driverless autonomous vehicles are available at <http://src.bna.com/mXT>.