

Calif. moves to mesh vehicle emission rules with U.S. rules

Debra Kahn – ClimateWire – February 26, 2010

The California Air Resources Board voted yesterday to amend the state's vehicular emissions rules to combine them with the federal rules passed in May 2009.

The amendments allow cars that meet the federal greenhouse gas standards for model years 2012 to 2016 to also comply with California's standards for each of those years. The federal standards are less stringent than California's from 2012 to 2015, but the two dovetail at 250 grams of carbon dioxide per mile in 2016.

According to ARB estimates, California and the 13 states that had adopted its regulations by 2009 would have reduced vehicular emissions by 793 million tons through 2050. With all 50 states participating in the federal program, 941 million tons of reductions is expected.

"The board's action affirms the important role that California -- and the states that adopted our standard -- played in driving the development of a national greenhouse gas standard for cars," said ARB Chairwoman Mary Nichols.

"While these regulations can certainly be met with existing, cost-effective technologies, it is my hope that they will lead to new, job creating product innovations that will strengthen the U.S. auto sector and provide improved products to American car buyers," state Sen. Fran Pavley (D) said in a statement.

Calif. to reconsider voluntary offset protocols

The ARB also voted yesterday to withdraw its approval of guidelines for forestry offset projects developed by a nonprofit group.

As California's cap-and-trade system takes shape and prepares to begin trading in 2012, regulators are considering how and whether to incorporate the existing voluntary offset market.

The California Air Resources Board decided that the first step to create a market for "compliance offsets" -- offsets that can be used to meet mandatory emissions targets -- was to cancel its approval of the voluntary market.

It voted yesterday to start withdrawing the state's approval of offset guidelines developed by a nonprofit group, the Climate Action Reserve. The guidelines cover offsets from forests and manure digesters, and have been used to issue carbon credits for about 40 projects in the state. CAR is on track to issue 10 million credits by the end of the year.

"Our concern is the need to maintain an arm's-length relationship with CAR or any organization who might come forth and try to do the same thing, and to make sure that we don't inadvertently -- by stamping these things with an ARB seal of approval -- turn them into something regulatory," Nichols said.

The shift from voluntary to mandatory is a big one

Environmentalists claimed that the move was significant, a tacit acknowledgment that the existing protocols wouldn't pass muster if subjected to environmental review, as will be required for cap-and-trade regulations.

"It's clear to me that they wouldn't be doing this if we hadn't pointed out to them that their adoption of voluntary protocols in the first place violated the California Environmental Quality Act," said Kevin Bundy, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

ARB staff said the move was largely procedural. "We're moving forward in the process from voluntary offsets to compliance, and as an element in this shift, we're going to consider the protocols as part and parcel of the cap-and-trade regulation, which will then require environmental review," said spokesman Stanley Young.

CAR President Gary Gero said he didn't expect any new protocols formed by the ARB to differ significantly from his own group's. "The key thing that's different between us operating a voluntary system and CARB operating a mandatory market is enforcement," he said. "We can go to courts to enforce our protocols once someone has signed up. CARB is a regulatory agency, so they can enforce through the imposition of fines and fees and penalties."

The ARB will hold public workshops on new protocols in April, perform an environmental review, and vote to approve the protocols in October.