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News TRAFFIC/TRANSPORTATION

Hybrids' carpool waiver in doubt

By Tony Bizjak -- Bee Staff Writer
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Bad news for California hybrid car owners who have been eagerly awaiting the day they can scoot into freeway carpool lanes as solo drivers.

State officials now say they aren't sure the new federal transportation act, passed by Congress Friday, gives them the go-ahead to allow high-mileage, gas-electric cars into carpool lanes.

State law signed last year by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced the state's intent to allow hybrid cars that top 45 miles per gallon, such as the Toyota Prius and Honda Insight Hybrid, to use diamond lanes during commute hours with a single occupant.

California's hybrid owners have been stuck in idle for months awaiting approval from federal officials, who set the rules on federal highway usage.

Friday's federal transportation bill does include an OK on the 45 mpg standard

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established by California law, officials said.

But it doesn't explicitly give California the go-ahead to implement a low-exhaust emission standard also included in the new state law.

Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, author of the California law, said she put the low-emissions standard in her bill as an important safeguard so that other solo motorists of high-mileage, but less-clean vehicles wouldn't take advantage of the law to use carpool lanes.

"My reason was to promote not just fuel-efficient vehicles, but (specifically) vehicles that greatly reduce air pollution," Pavley said Friday.

Attorneys with the state Air Resources Board were reviewing the federal bill Friday and conferring with federal transportation officials to see if California can go ahead - even without an explicit federal OK on the emissions issue.

"The bottom line is we frankly don't know yet," ARB spokesman Jerry Martin said Friday.

Meanwhile, the federal transportation bill, which provides \$286.4 billion for projects nationally over a six-year period, was sent to President Bush, who is expected to sign it into law in the coming weeks.

If the hybrid bill's emissions glitch is resolved by the time Bush signs the bill, state Department of Motor Vehicles officials say they are ready to implement a windshield sticker system for qualifying car owners.

"That's half good news," said Holly Brickner, a Sacramento real estate agent who owns three hybrid vehicles and calls them guilt-free cars. "Any way government can incentivize people to purchase hybrids makes sense."

She is among thousands who have made hybrid cars a cult trend in California in the last year.

Gas-electric hybrid vehicles save fuel and reduce pollution by switching at certain speeds from a gas to an electric motor under the hood. The electric motor self-charges while the vehicle is in operation.

The Pavley bill, which became California law Jan. 1, goes out of existence at the end of 2007, when Pavley said she hopes there will be many more Californians driving hybrids. So far, Toyota reports it has sold 50,000 Prius models in California, making it the state's top-selling hybrid, but still a tiny portion of overall vehicle sales.

State law allows officials to limit carpool lane stickers to 75,000.

Nevertheless, some transportation advocates in metropolitan areas, such as the Bay Area Transportation and Land Use Coalition, have complained the law could clog carpool lanes, making them less useful for buses and carpoolers.

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