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Friday, January 2, 2004

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## Diesel drought: Emissions law blocks sale of some VWs

By MEREDITH GOAD, Portland Press Herald Writer

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Drivers wanted? In Maine these days, Volkswagen dealers have a new twist on that catchy commercial slogan: Cars wanted.

Maine VW dealers won't be able to sell diesel versions of the Golf, Jetta, Passat and Touareg for the next three years because they don't meet California emissions standards.

Maine adopted the California standards in 2000, but this is the first time a car has become unavailable for sale here because it was not California-certified.

The restriction applies to new cars - those with less than 7,500 miles on their odometers - that feature the turbo direct injection, or TDI, diesel engine.

Consumers can still drive to New Hampshire to purchase one of the cars and drive it back to Maine for registration. And they can still buy a used model in Maine.

"We're not banning these vehicles by any means," said

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#### Today's Question

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MaineToday.com readers for  
their reactions to events in the  
news:



#### Diesel Emissions

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Ron Severance of the state Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Air Quality.

But Maine's auto dealers, who worry their business will motor south, and fans of diesel cars are not happy.

"You can drive all over the state with this technology, but we can't sell it," said Tom Brown of the Maine Auto Dealers Association. "It doesn't make sense."

Bill Sowles, owner of the Morong Falmouth Volkswagen dealership, said cars outfitted with TDI engines account for 10 percent of his business. They are popular with commuters and people who live in rural parts of Maine because they can get up to 50 miles per gallon.

Sowles is convinced he'll lose some of his regular customers to out-of-state dealerships.

"The diesel customer is kind of in their own cult, if you will," he said. "They will drive anywhere to get a diesel. They really want these cars."

William Lord, a diesel fan from Cape Porpoise, has collected the 150 signatures he needs to force the state Board of Environmental Protection to consider an exemption for the Volkswagen TDIs. A public hearing has been scheduled for 2:30 p.m. Jan. 15 at the Senator Inn Best Western in Augusta.

In a letter to DEP Commissioner Dawn Gallagher, Lord called the sales restriction "counterproductive regulation that misses the big picture."

Higher fuel efficiency reduces the amount of carbon dioxide - which contributes to global warming - going into the air, Lord said. And TDI easily burns biodiesel, an environmentally friendly fuel that further cuts emissions.

"I believe that no state regulator wants to see the 'baby thrown out with the bath water,' " Lord wrote. "Losing the TDI for three years would be a disservice to efficiency-conscious Mainers, Maine businessmen and to our environment."

But Severance, of the air bureau, says it was Volkswagen's choice

strict emission standards cannot be sold in the state. There are some new models of Volkswagen that run on diesel fuel and do not meet these standards. But Mainers still can purchase the cars in another state and register them to drive in Maine. Is this a loophole that needs to be closed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Vote!

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not to bring the TDI vehicles up to California standards.

The Volkswagen TDI engine passed every emission standard except for nitrogen oxide, Severance said. Rather than improve the technology to bring it into compliance, the auto manufacturer decided to wait until low-sulfur fuel is introduced in 2007. Low-sulfur fuel burns cleaner and will make the entire issue go away.

The result: Volkswagen diesel models for 2004, 2005 and 2006 are verboten in Maine.

Severance said Lord's petition for rule-making, the technical term for his exemption request, is a first for the air bureau - at least the first he's seen in 26 years on the job.

He said Lord's point about carbon dioxide is well-taken, but California emissions standards primarily address volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxide and particulate matter - not carbon dioxide.

"There are positives to diesel, and as long as you can control the emissions, then diesel has a place as a fuel for this nation," Severance said. "Nobody's trying to ban it, we just want to control it as much as we can to make it safe for the environment."

Severance said he's concerned that the exemption proposed for Volkswagen could open the door to other exemptions to Maine's emissions standards.

The state could have handled the compliance problem by imposing a "registration denial," the solution preferred by Massachusetts and New York, two other states that follow California standards. In those states, motorists are not allowed to register vehicles that are not California-certified.

That means consumers can't drive to other states to purchase the vehicles, and they can't buy used cars.

Severance said handling the issue at the dealership level provides sufficient compliance without having to go through another layer of regulation and resources at the municipal level.

But Brown, of the Maine Auto Dealers Association, doesn't see how it's going to help Maine's environment if consumers can still drive the cars in Maine. Only car dealers will be hurt, he said.

"Frankly, we understand that people who like these types of engines are going to go get them," Brown said. "New Hampshire does not prohibit their sale, and that's not very far away."

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