

Air board trims mandate for zero-emission cars

CARMAKERS' NEW TARGET: 7,500 TO 12,500

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SACRAMENTO — State regulators on Thursday cut by more than half the number of emission-free vehicles that car manufacturers have to produce in the coming years — a blow to environmental and health activists.

The move by the state Air Resources Board — which was less severe than activists had feared — could mean fewer electric and fuel-cell cars will be available to motorists looking

to avoid high gas prices. But regulators argued that those types of cars aren't ready to be sold in mass quantities anyway, no matter what state rules say.

By mandating tens of thousands of plug-in hybrids — as the air board also did Thursday — consumers will still come out ahead, regulators said. Plug-in hybrids have batteries that can be recharged with a regular household outlet, extending the range

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A solar-powered electric vehicle, with a replica power plug, is parked outside the state Air Resources Board meeting.

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they can travel on little or no gasoline.

Before Thursday's action, six of the largest car manufacturers would have had to market 25,000 zero-emission vehicles between 2012 and 2014. The vote reduced that number to 7,500 fuel-cell cars, or 12,500 electric cars.

The zero-emission program has been relaxed repeatedly since it was first adopted in 1990. Initially the regulations called for 10 percent of all car sales in California — about 100,000 annually — to be electric vehicles by 2004. In 2003, that figure was scaled back to 25,000.

After Thursday's 7-0 vote, critics said the air board let carmakers off the hook again with what they called a further reduction of 70 percent in the zero-emission-vehicle mandate.

"It's a failure of public policy," said Jay Friedland, legislative director of Plug In America, an advocacy group for plug-in vehicles. "They're treating the whole program as if it's a research program" for car manufacturers "instead of forcing them to develop new technologies and get actual cars on the road."

Mary Nichols, chairwoman of the air board, disagreed. She pointed to the board's decision to also mandate more than 58,000 plug-in hybrids — for example, a Toyota Prius with an additional battery that gets up to 100 miles per gallon — between 2012 and 2014.

"I don't think that's a step backward in the real world," Nichols said.

The 7,500 zero-emission vehicles that regulators voted to mandate was three times the number staff members had proposed. So from the perspective of environmentalists and health advocates, the result could have been worse.

The hearing lasted nearly

eight hours, and more than 65 people testified, many imploring regulators not to bow to the wishes of the auto industry.

The debate drew in luminaries such as former U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz (who wrote a letter to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger arguing for a stronger electric car mandate, but did not attend the hearing) and former CIA Director James Woolsey, now a partner in a venture capital firm that invests in green technologies.

Woolsey stepped to the microphone with a thick orange extension cord — about the only equipment that's needed, he said, to run a plug-in hybrid.

He said in an interview afterward that he owns a Prius recently converted into a plug-in. "I have a bumper sticker on it that says, 'Bin Laden hates this car,'" Woolsey said.

The six large car manufacturers subject to the zero-emission program — Chrysler, Ford, GM, Honda, Nissan and Toyota — opposed even the scaled-back rules. In a letter to the air board earlier this month, they wrote that complying with the changes proposed by the board's staff would "place an inordinate burden" on them.

A spokesman for GM said after the vote the fuel-cell requirement is unrealistic until a viable network of fueling stations is in place.

"We can get the engineering right," said Dave Barthmuss, "but without an adequate fueling infrastructure, we're going to be very limited where we can put these vehicles."

Regulators said carmakers will have to spend about \$1 billion annually over three years to comply with the new rules.

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