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'Cool' car rules could affect radios, phones

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Washington -- California's latest requirement for the auto industry -- advanced window glazing to keep vehicles cooler -- could prevent drivers from making phone calls, listening to satellite radio or using garage door openers.

It also could lead Chrysler Group LLC to stop selling its soft-top convertible Jeep Wrangler in the Golden State. The standard for sunroofs is so tough that automakers warn the glass would have to be "effectively black."

The California Air Resources Board has adopted a new "Cool Cars" regulation ordering advanced glazing of windows to block the sun's heat and reduce the need for air conditioning. Windows must be coated with microscopic specks of metal oxide to reflect sunlight.

Advocates say the requirements will reduce the temperature inside vehicles, saving gasoline and cutting greenhouse gases.

The regulations take effect in 2012, with a three-year phase-in and requires that by 2014 all vehicles prevent 45 percent of the energy from the sun from entering a vehicle and 60 percent by 2016. The regulation applies to all new vehicles weighing 10,000 pounds or less. The board will review the second phase of the regulation next summer. By the end of this month, the board plans to publish its completed regulation. The public gets 15 days to comment with the final package to be completed by May 2010.

Some companies worry that the new requirements haven't been fully tested. In a Sept. 22 letter, Garmin International Inc., the California Manufacturers and Technology Association and the International Bridge, Tunnel & Turnpike Association warned that "more time was needed to assess the impact" of the rules.

They noted that "ankle bracelets for parolees," along with cell phone calls and laptops, "may be adversely affected by the metallic reflective standard" because the signals "must be able to penetrate the glazing in vehicles."

Garmin's initial testing said the signals from GPS devices were degraded.

Major automakers, led by the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers and Association of International Automobile Manufacturers, argued for a different standard that would "absorb" rather than "reflect" energy and wouldn't risk wireless signals.

"It achieves about 85 percent of the benefit at about 10 percent of the cost, and it doesn't have any of the complications of reflective glazings," said the alliance's Steve Douglas. He said the standard would lead to "more dropped calls." Sunroofs would have to be "effectively black. So there's no light coming through that."

Honda said the new requirement "is simply not feasible" on the current timetable. Toyota Motor Corp. used

similar reflective glass in Japan from 1989-94, before dropping it because of problems with radio wave devices.

Chrysler Group LLC has sought an exemption for vehicles' plastic windows, warning it could affect its GEM Electric vehicle and Jeep Wrangler.

The irony is the GEM electric vehicles don't even offer air conditioning, Chrysler said.

"The very popular Jeep Wrangler fitted with a soft convertible top uses flexible roll-up side windows which are not capable of meeting the side window standard," Ross Good, Chrysler's senior manager of government relations told the board. "Outlawing the soft top would require us to use the hard-top vehicle with the hard windows, which would add significant weight to the vehicle."

The initial standard will cost \$111 over the life of a vehicle; the 2016 standard will add \$250 to the cost of each vehicle. California says it will take five to 12 years for consumers to recoup the costs from reduced gasoline use.

Air conditioning burns more gasoline and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. California says its regulation will save 700,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide by 2020, which is equivalent to taking 140,000 cars off the road for a year.

The new rule has other benefits, California says. It will keep cars 13 degrees cooler and reduce fading of upholstery and cracking of the dashboard. "This is a common sense and cost-effective measure that will help cool the cars we drive and fight global warming," said Mary Nichols, chairwoman of the California Air Resources Board.

The board has acknowledged that the reflective coating on windows can hinder communications, but said antennas are "an alternative already abundantly used."

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