

EPA boosts auto emissions testing after Volkswagen scandal.

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By Sean Reilly

U.S. EPA officials today said they are ramping up emissions testing across the auto industry, seeking to regain public confidence after last week's revelation that Volkswagen had gotten away with cheating for years.

In a letter sent today to all car manufacturers, the agency said it may require testing on any vehicle under real-world driving conditions with the goal of detecting "defeat devices" similar to what VW has admitted to using on four-cylinder diesel-fueled vehicles from model years 2009 through 2015.

Although improved air quality over the years shows the existing regulatory framework is working, "we must continue to improve and adapt our oversight, and we will," Janet McCabe, EPA's acting air chief, told reporters in a conference call this morning.

The agency is collaborating with the California Air Resources Board and its Canadian counterpart, Environment Canada, to test VW diesel models already on the road for the defeat devices, said Chris Grundler, director of EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality.

EPA and California regulators are also working closely with Volkswagen, Grundler said, to come up with "recall solutions" for the 482,000 VW and Audi diesel vehicles covered by the violation notice issued Friday. Affected models include the Jetta, Beetle, Golf, Audi A3 and Passat.

The scandal, which could cost Volkswagen billions of dollars in fines just in the United States, has already forced the resignation of Martin Winterkorn, the CEO of Volkswagen AG, and led the company to ask German prosecutors to open a criminal investigation. Replacing Winterkorn is Matthias Müller, the current chairman of Porsche AG, Volkswagen's board announced today.

It also has raised questions about the adequacy of EPA's testing regimen, given that the cheating was uncovered not by its staff, but by West Virginia University researchers working for the International Council on Clean Transportation, a private nonprofit group.

On today's call, Grundler said EPA had developed the testing technology used by the West Virginia researchers, adding that the agency has focused its real-world testing on heavy-duty diesel trucks that generate far more nitrogen oxide emissions than light-duty cars. The software Volkswagen used to circumvent emissions requirements was buried in 100 million lines of code, he added.

At the Safe Climate Campaign, which has been critical of the existing regimen, Director Dan Becker said the added testing announced today makes sense but is "only a very initial step."

"EPA is going to have to move to bring testing in-house," Becker said in a phone interview. "They are going to have to essentially take the automakers out of the process of doing self-testing, then reporting some of the results -- or false results -- to EPA."

In an email, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, whose members include VW's American arm, would only say the trade group is certain that all carmakers will review the new EPA guidance.

In a statement, a spokeswoman for the Association of Global Automakers, the trade group representing many foreign car manufacturers -- although not Volkswagen -- said "the integrity of the emissions and fuel economy testing certification process is very important to our industry," adding that it will keep working with state and federal regulators to ensure "that the process achieves the objectives of the regulators, manufacturers, and consumers."

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