

Environment & Energy

California Board Calls for Zero-Emission Harbor Vessels by 2035

By Zach Bright

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- Boats must use zero-emission engines or alternatives
 - Update improves on existing regulations
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New regulations to tighten boating emissions are coming to California shores, after the state's air agency passed an amendment to its commercial harbor craft regulations on Thursday.

The California Air Resources Board unanimously voted to require boats in the state's ports and marinas to fully transition to zero emissions by 2035 where feasible. The update to existing regulations is projected to improve air quality and reduce emissions-related health issues.

With the new guidelines, Air Resources Board staff predicted emissions reductions of 89% for diesel particulate matter and 54% for oxides of nitrogen. Harbor crafts—which include passenger ferries, tugboats, and tow boats—currently generate 165 tons of diesel particulate matter annually and 15.1 tons of nitrogen oxides daily, according to the board.

The rules saw substantial support mixed with echoes of hesitation from members of the state's commercial boating industry during public comments on the proposal.

"I do understand how unsettling that this can feel for some of the folks that have to have great change in their business and in this industry," board member Davina Hurt said before the vote.

However, Hurt stressed the need to "reverse the negative effects of climate change and improve the air quality."

Timeline, Impact

The amendment mandates five compliance deadlines: Tier 1 engines powering vessels over 50 horsepower by 2025; ferries by 2029; research, sport fishing, and excursion vessels by 2030; barges and workboats by 2031; and commercial fishing craft by 2032.

If any of the harbor craft can't secure a zero-emissions engine, it can demonstrate equivalent emissions reductions or secure additional compliance time through a credit system or financial hardship exemption. In situations in which technology doesn't yet exist, they can use the cleanest certified engine in combination with a board-verified diesel particulate filter.

A midterm review will take place to evaluate progress made by 2028.

When the amendment had its first public hearing in November, many businesses expressed worry over what they considered to be too quick of a transition deadline. That led the board to relax some requirements to give industry time to adapt.

During Thursday's public comment, members of the boating community and others spoke in favor of lowering emissions, with a number expressing satisfaction with changes from the board.

"For those of us in the trenches, we've spoken to business owners in person, who were basically ready to throw in the towel prematurely," said Andrea Lueker, president of the California Association of Harbormasters and Port Captains. "On a positive note, we're glad where we are today on this issue."

To contact the reporter on this story: Zach Bright at zbright@bloombergindustry.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Chuck McCutcheon at cmccutcheon@bloombergindustry.com

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