

NJ seeks to overhaul car emissions testing

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Commercial vehicles & re-inspections would go to private facilities, while older cars would no longer be tested

TRENTON – State officials want to steer more vehicles to private facilities for emissions inspections starting in mid-2016, under a plan that would also end emissions tests for a quarter-million older cars, likely the dirtiest vehicles on the road.

The state Motor Vehicle Commission has invited companies to bid on a new contract for emissions inspections that it hopes will cut its \$42 million annual expense by millions. But the proposal does not fully privatize the inspections, to the disappointment of the trade group that includes repair shops. And the plan to excuse older cars from testing irks environmentalists.

“New Jersey still has a massive smog pollution problem, which is directly linked to our cars and trucks,” said Doug O’Malley, director of the group Environment New Jersey. “It is ludicrous to propose that we’re going to stop testing the oldest cars on the roads.”

The state plans to continue the on-board diagnostic tests used to check emissions on cars made since 1996, but cars from 1995 and earlier will no longer have their emissions tested because the state will eliminate the tailpipe emissions tests.

All cars that fail their first inspection will have to go to a private facility for re-inspection, as will all commercial vehicles. The state says the changes will push 300,000 vehicles to private facilities and reduce the number of inspections at state-owned, contractor-operated central inspection facilities by nearly 25 percent.

Under the current contract, which expires in May, the state pays around \$20 per inspection to Parsons Environment & Infrastructure Group. The state thinks it will save millions by reducing the number of inspections at state facilities and shrinking the cost per inspection.

“That’s going to result in a shorter customer wait time. It’s going to significantly reduce our per-inspection cost, and it’s going to reduce inspection costs for outdated inspection practices,” said Jeanne Ashmore, the Motor Vehicle Commission deputy chief administrator. “So we’re going to save millions of dollars each year.”

A [Privatization Task Force](#) created by Gov. Chris Christie in 2010, the first year of his term, recommended that the state withdraw from participating in vehicle inspections by 2012. It further suggested that the state sell the land that’s home to its current inspection stations.

But that’s not what’s being proposed, to the chagrin of Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, C-Store, Automotive Association.

“I am truly disappointed that the state is not going to save \$43 million a year. I am truly disappointed for the state of New Jersey,” Risalvato said. “I believe that they just blew an opportunity to save a lot of money.”

Risalvato said the state will likely reduce its cost by at least \$10 million.

“Let’s say they save \$10 million,” he said. “Forty-three minus 10 is 33. You think we need \$33 million in the budget? Why would the state blow this opportunity?”

Mairin Bellack, the MVC's communications director, indicated that the task force's recommendation was considered but that stakeholders preferred modifying the current approach to scrapping it.

"Additional information was gathered from various stakeholders in coordination with state entities after this report," Bellack said. "Input from the stakeholders indicated that there would be a higher rate of satisfaction and preference in maintaining the current 'hybrid' program that utilizes both centralized test-only inspection sites and decentralized private inspection test-and-repair facilities."

The MVC has 26 central inspection facilities. Those, and specialty facilities and mobile units in the state network, handled more than 2 million inspections last year, 86 percent of all emissions inspections.

There are also more than 1,200 private inspection facilities, more than 750 of which have installed the tailpipe emissions testing equipment. Private facilities handled around 336,000 emissions inspections in 2014, so their customer traffic would nearly double under the new plan.

Private facilities charge fees ranging from \$19 to \$50 per inspection, though Ashmore said the fee is waived if drivers who fail a first inspection at an MVC facility get re-inspected at the same private facility that does the repairs.



In this 1998 photo, SPX Corporations' exhibit with emissions sampler in tailpipe, Wednesday 12/2/98 at NJ DMV new emissions exhibition at National Guard Armory in Woodbridge. With wheels on a dynamometer, emissions will be tested with engine at running speed instead of idling. Mike Nixon/Staff (Photo: Digital Collections/IPTC)

Private inspection facilities will have to dispose of obsolete inspection equipment and buy new computer workstations for doing on-board diagnostic tests from the contractor. They spent roughly \$60,000 each for equipment in 1999 that became out-of-date, then spent \$10,000 for replacement equipment in 2009, and now will have to purchase new equipment again.

The state's request for bids seems to anticipate a shortage of private facilities in some areas. It requires the contractor to do a written evaluation of the facilities' distribution by county and have a strategy for recruiting more.

In 2013 and 2014, there were almost 265,000 initial [emission tests](#) conducted on cars older than the 1996 model year. Roughly one of every five, more than 50,000 cars, failed the tailpipe inspections, which measure hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide. For approximately 256,000 vehicles from the 1995 model year or earlier, or 4.4 percent of the more than 5.8 million vehicles in the state, inspections will no longer be needed under the new system, probably starting in the summer.

O'Malley, from Environment New Jersey, said the Christie administration should withdraw its bid request because the plan would mean drivers pay more and the cars most likely to create the most pollution would no longer be tested.

"Under this proposal, we would let more than 50,000 of the oldest and dirtiest cars off the hook for emissions tests," O'Malley said. "We have all been behind a car on the Parkway that looks like it was from the Dukes of Hazzard. This plan would leave that car on the road."

Ashmore said ending the tailpipe emission tests won't affect New Jersey's ability to meet air quality requirements and said the number of cars on the roads from before 1995 is "a dwindling population." She said 11 states that are federally required to test emissions have ended tailpipe tests.

"Probably about 3,500 vehicles every month are taken off the road when it comes to that, so that's a population that's going away anyway and declining," Ashmore said. "We're going to step them out of the state inspection process, and there will be no inspections for them at all."

Mechanical safety inspections for private passenger vehicles ended in 2010. The emissions test that remains will be an on-board diagnostic test, as well as related visual checks for things such as liquid leaks and visible smoke. The gas-cap check that tests whether fumes are escaping from a gas tank will switch to a visual inspection.

Cars are inspected every other year, though they're exempt for their first five years.

New Jersey's experience with the partial privatization of car inspections has been at times difficult, particularly with the 1998 award of the original contract to Parsons, a process [found by the State Commission of Investigation](#) to be undermined by mismanagement and political manipulation.

Bidders will have to submit proposals by Feb. 22. The state is looking to award a six-year contract that would take effect in May and extend through 2022.

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