



Oregon Department of Environmental Quality

FAQ: Oregon's Vehicle Inspection Program

How to prevent 15,000 tons of emissions for around \$1 a month

What is Oregon's Vehicle Inspection Program?

The Clean Air Act requires state air pollution control agencies to adopt strategies to minimize and maintain air pollution concentrations below the National Ambient Air Quality Standards. NAAQS limit the concentrations of criteria air pollutants like carbon monoxide and oxides of nitrogen, which contribute to ground-level ozone and harm public health. Strategies to meet the NAAQS must be approved by the EPA. The resulting body of regulations adopted by a state is known as the State Implementation Plan. A key EPA approved strategy commonly used in SIPs to maintain compliance with NAAQS is an Inspection and Maintenance program requiring testing of vehicle emissions.

I/M programs work by identifying vehicles with high emissions or non-functioning emissions control components and incentivizing vehicle owners to make repairs. Oregon's Vehicle Inspection Program is Oregon's I/M program and is a cornerstone pollution control strategy included in Oregon's EPA-approved SIP for the Portland and Medford-Ashland Air Quality Maintenance Areas.

VIP helps Oregon maintain compliance with federal Clean Air Act standards without disproportionately impacting business operations. If Oregon ended the Vehicle Inspection Program, the state would need to find emissions reductions from other sectors of the economy in order to maintain compliance with the federal Clean Air Act and State Implementation Plan.

Why do some drivers need to have their emission systems tested and others don't?

When Oregon began implementing requirements of the federal Clean Air Act in the 1970's and 1980's, air quality in the Portland Metro and Rogue Valley areas of the state did not meet federal standards for ozone and carbon monoxide. In response to the poor air quality, the Department of Environmental Quality was required to develop plans to reduce these pollutants, and to maintain compliance with air quality standards. The state implemented the VIP to address emissions in high traffic corridors.

Some of the same air quality challenges persist today. For example, concentrations of ground-level ozone are on the rise. Both the Portland and Medford-metro areas have experienced unhealthy levels of ozone in recent years. Emissions from cars and trucks are responsible for the majority of the pollution that produces this ozone. Cars and trucks are also the source of other federally regulated Criteria and Toxic pollutants.

How much pollution does the Vehicle Inspection Program prevent?

Cars and trucks are the biggest source of air pollution in Oregon. Modeling estimates that the VIP prevents approximately 15,000 tons of pollution annually. This amount is determined by using the U.S. EPA's Motor Vehicle Emission Simulator tool. MOVES is a comprehensive tool that allows DEQ

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to estimate pollution reductions by comparing pollution from non-tested vehicles to vehicles required to test and calculating the difference. By ensuring emissions systems on vehicles are operating as intended, VIP reduces carbon monoxide, oxides of nitrogen, and volatile organic compounds, some of which create ground level ozone. These pollutants are linked to cardiovascular disease, increased cancer risk, respiratory irritation, and developmental and reproductive harm.

How does the pollution reduction from VIP compare to reductions from other pollution sources, like permitted businesses?

Modeling conducted in 2023 demonstrated that if VIP testing were to end, it would be equivalent of adding 24 new industrial emitters of carbon monoxide and 25 new industrial emitters of oxides of nitrogen within the testing boundary areas.

Vehicle emissions testing plays a strategic role in Oregon's broader air quality permitting framework. By reducing mobile-source pollution through VIP, the regulatory burden on stationary sources like manufacturers, data centers and fuel terminals is lessened. These businesses are already subject to increasingly stringent permitting requirements under the Clean Air Act.

VIP helps Oregon maintain compliance with federal Clean Air Act standards without disproportionately impacting private business and economic growth in Oregon. VIP is a balancing mechanism that allows DEQ to offset emissions from vehicles and avoid more aggressive regulations on private business.

Why is there an ongoing need for emissions testing if only a few cars fail?

While it's true that fewer than 4% of vehicles fail their emissions test, the point of the program is not to find failing vehicles. Rather the program encourages regular maintenance of vehicles and their pollution control systems.

In fact, nearly 25% of vehicles that pass do so because of maintenance performed shortly before testing, often prompted by the test itself. The timing of repairs closely correlates with registration renewal reminders from DMV. This indicates that the program acts as a behavioral nudge, and an effective incentive, encouraging proactive repairs that prevent excess emissions before they occur. Even among newer vehicles that are less than 6 years old, 12% would have failed without repairs completed in the 30 days prior to testing. Manufacturing standards are high, but emissions control systems degrade over time and require upkeep.

Cars today are cleaner than they used to be, why do we still need this program?

Today's vehicles are manufactured to run cleaner, but that relies upon regular maintenance. The program ensures vehicles, and their emission control systems, are maintained and functioning as designed. 25% of all vehicles receive repairs during the three months before testing, which includes 24.7% of five- and 6-year-old vehicles. Without these repairs, these vehicles would have failed the emissions test. Even vehicles manufactured to be more fuel-efficient with lower emissions only retain those benefits with proper maintenance.

Recent federal activity is projected to increase the amount of carbon emissions in Oregon by around 5 million metric tons (equivalent to the annual emissions of 1.1 million passenger cars on the road). The current administration has pulled back on enforcing the minimum fuel efficiency standards required of manufacturers. Without enforcement, manufacturers may have little incentive to improve fuel economy and, by extension, reduce emissions of smog-forming pollutants including CO, NOx, and other harmful tailpipe pollutants.

In this context, Oregon's Vehicle Inspection Program plays a more critical role than ever. By ensuring that emissions control systems remain functional and effective throughout a vehicle's life, VIP helps mitigate the emissions gap left by weakened federal oversight. It is a state-level safeguard that directly supports Oregon's ability to meet its legislatively mandated climate goals while protecting public health.

How do we know the program is effective?

A 2022 study of vehicles traveling through Oregon showed that cars and trucks tested in Oregon pollute, in aggregate, 44% less carbon monoxide, and 45% less nitrogen oxides, compared to vehicles that are not tested. Without the program, on-road emissions would increase by 7–20% in Portland and 5–8% in the Rogue Valley. These increases would directly affect air quality, especially in urban areas where vehicle density is high. Pollutants, including carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds are linked to cardiovascular disease, increased cancer risk, respiratory irritation, and developmental and reproductive harm. These impacts disproportionately impact those living closest to highway corridors.

Is the program cost effective?

Oregon Revised Statute 468A.370 requires the Environmental Quality Commission to determine the most cost-effective approach for testing and certifying vehicle emission controls. The most recent study conducted found DEQ's Vehicle Inspection Program to be the **most cost-effective method** of administering an I/M program. A recent review of jurisdictions with decentralized, private testing showed that the average cost of testing and certification for vehicles was between \$52 and \$100 for testing.

In contrast, drivers within the Portland Metro Area pay \$25 when they renew their vehicle registration. Drivers in the Rogue Valley area pay \$20. This cost is biannual which means the cost to Oregon drivers is approximately \$1 per month for cleaner air.

The program is administered by 100 FTE including Clean Air Station staff and support like IT, maintenance, engineering, and administrative staff. The program is entirely funded through issuing Certificates of Compliance to cars within the testing boundaries. It does not rely on the General Fund. VIP's efficient procedures and innovation allow it to remain highly cost-effective.

How much does DEQ charge for testing?

The VIP does not charge for testing and only assesses fees for issuing a Certificate of Compliance once a vehicle has passed the test. Unlike most other states, Oregon's program offers **unlimited free testing**, which is used to help identify problems with the emissions control equipment. This can be especially important for low-income drivers or those relying on older vehicles.

To meet the needs of lower-income drivers, VIP also formed an innovative Clean Air Partners program in partnership with United Way and the Tonkin Dealerships to assist failing vehicles with repairs. United Way collects the donations and approves payments for repairs while VIP guides customers through the program and manages the repair process with the dealership locations. CAPs relies solely on donations from the public to United Way. At its current funding levels, CAPs is able to facilitate repairs for approximately 30 low-income Oregonians annually. VIP is currently working with United Way to explore new ways to promote the program and drive more donations to support both additional customers and more complicated repair work.

What is the connection between DMV and DEQ?

Oregon Revised Statute requires that prior to a vehicle being registered or renewing a registration it must receive a Certificate of Compliance confirming the vehicle has a properly functioning emissions control system. VIP has a long-term partnership with DMV to process registration renewals at the time of VIP testing to better support our shared customers. Each biennium, VIP issues renewals and collects payments for over 675,000 vehicle registrations on behalf of DMV. **That means DEQ manages about 2/3 of all vehicle renewals in the Portland-metro and Medford testing areas.**

This allows customers to complete both their emission inspection and vehicle registration renewal at once, saving a trip to the DMV and easing pressure on DMV locations. Over 98% of customers find the one-stop-shopping afforded by the program to be a valuable perk.

VIP also conducted over 100,000 VIN inspections over the last two years, which would otherwise need to be performed by DMV or the State Police.

How does Oregon's program compare to California and Washington?

Oregon's VIP operates in the two areas of the state that have struggled to meet National Ambient Air Quality Standards. The areas are unique both in terms of geography, which can trap emissions, and population. While the DEQ is responsible for issuing a Certificate of Compliance, it has entered into a first-of-its kind public-private partnership with repair shops, oil change businesses and other locations to authorize them to conduct testing under the purview of DEQ. Through this "DEQ Too" program, customers can choose from over 140 private business locations to test at in addition to the seven state-operated Clean Air Stations.

After 38 years, Washington's emission check program ended Jan. 1, 2020. With the end of the program, vehicle owners are no longer required to have their vehicle's emissions tested before renewing their vehicle registration. Driving a vehicle with modified emissions equipment or a vehicle that smokes is **still** illegal in Washington but not monitored. A 2022 study of on-road emissions in Oregon found that unregulated and untested vehicles driving through Oregon's testing boundaries were responsible for **more than half of the ozone producing emissions**. This demonstrates that there are real air quality consequences when I/M programs like VIP are not in place.

California has maintained its I/M program. California relies upon private entities to test vehicles. Drivers pay an average of \$70 for the test and certificate, nearly three times the cost in Oregon.

What do vehicle owners think of the requirement to test their vehicle every other year?

One of VIP's evaluation tools is a customer service survey provided at the conclusion of emissions test, regardless of the outcome. In 2025, year to date, VIP has a 95% positive customer service rating from the surveys. Additionally, survey results demonstrate that 85% of those responding had a good or very good understanding of the need for emissions testing. Only 2% of respondents said that they didn't understand the need for testing. To increase transparency and provide more information about the program, VIP has recently begun publishing its annual EPA report publicly, which demonstrates the work VIP does and the impact it has on maintaining air quality standards.

Staff at Clean Air Stations work diligently to test as efficiently as possible, and while wait times for customers can be unpredictable due to the on-demand nature of testing, VIP stations have an estimated wait time of less than 11 minutes between queueing in the lane to beginning the emissions test. DEQ also provides online "lane cameras" so that drivers can check how busy Clean Air Stations are in real time.

While renewing your vehicles tags may not be most people's favorite activity, most of those responding to the survey (or posting reviews on Google) have a positive experience.

Contact

Aeron Teverbaugh, Sr. Legislative and Policy Analyst, Department of Environmental Quality.
Aeron.Teverbaugh@deq.oregon.gov.

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