

California to give the green light to truly driverless cars

By JUSTIN PRITCHARD
Associated Press



AP Photo/Tony Avelar, File

In this May 2015 file photo, Google's self-driving prototype car is presented during a demonstration at the Google campus in Mountain View, Calif.

"We don't want to race to meet a deadline. We want to get this right."

— **Bernard Soriano**, a leader of the motor vehicle agency's self-driving program

The rules are subject to a public hearing and a comment period and could change. Regulators hope to put them in effect by December.

The proposal is more than two years overdue, reflecting complex questions of safety and highly advanced technology.

"We don't want to race to meet a deadline," said Bernard Soriano, a leader of the motor vehicle agency's self-driving program. "We want to get this right."

In one important change from prior drafts, once a manufacturer declares its technology is road-ready, it can put its cars on the market. That self-certification approach mirrors how federal officials regulate standard cars, and represents a big victory for such major players as Waymo, Google's self-driving car project.

Also under the proposed regulations, any driverless car still must be remotely monitored and able to pull itself over safely in an emergency.

A Waymo spokesman had no immediate comment. The chief skeptic of the technology, California-based Consumer Watchdog, said the proposal does not protect the public.

"The new rules are too industry-friendly," Consumer Watchdog's John Simpson said in a statement.

The technology is developing quickly. More than a year ago, a Waymo prototype with no steering wheel or pedals drove a blind man on city streets in Texas.

Supporters say the cars may one day be far safer than those with humans at the wheel, since the machinery won't drive distracted, drunk or drowsy.

During road-testing in California, self-driving cars

with human backup drivers are believed to have caused just a few collisions.

A year ago, Waymo reported that during the 424,331 miles its cars had driven themselves, a human driver intervened 11 times to avoid a collision. In an update earlier this year, Waymo said its fleet had driven 636,868 miles in autonomous mode; it did not say how many crashes were avoided.

In all, 27 companies have Department of Motor Vehicles permits to test on California roads.

Waymo was able to legally put its prototype on the road in Texas because state law there does not prohibit a fully driverless car. Other states have explicitly invited the technology onto its roads, including Michigan, whose governor signed a bill in December that allows the public testing of cars with no driver.

In the meantime, the industry has been lobbying the U.S. Transportation Department and Congress for rule changes that could speed the introduction of truly driverless cars.

PENDLETON

Loan officer receives top honor

East Oregonian

Elaine Anderson of Umpqua Bank in Pendleton was recently recognized as a 2016 Leaders Club loan officer.

The award goes to the top producing loan officers in the home lending division. Anderson was promoted as the new sales manager of home lending in 2014, and prior to that she was an Umpqua Bank loan officer. An Eastern Oregon native, she has more than 30 years of banking experience, nearly two dozen years in mortgage lending.

"Elaine exemplifies her leadership role through delivering a high level of customer service to her

home purchase, refinance, construction and renovation loan clients," said Gary Duffy, senior vice president production director

Umpqua Bank Home Lending offers a wide variety of home loan options for purchase and refinance, including first time homebuyer, investment, custom construction/remodel, high balance and government financing programs.

Headquartered in Roseburg, Umpqua Bank is a subsidiary of Umpqua Holdings Corporation, and has locations in Pendleton, Hermiston and numerous cities across the West Coast, Idaho and northern Nevada.



Anderson

A robust February jobs report points to resilient U.S. economy

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. employers added a robust 235,000 jobs in February and raised pay at a brisk pace — signs that a resilient economy has given many companies the confidence to hire in anticipation of solid growth ahead.

With the unemployment rate dipping to a low 4.7 percent from 4.8 percent, the job market appears to be fundamentally healthy or nearly so.

Friday's employment report from the government showed that more people began looking for jobs last month, an encouraging sign that they've grown confident about their prospects. Hiring was strong enough to absorb those new job seekers as well as some of the previously unemployed.

The picture of an economy on solid footing nearly eight years after the Great Recession ended has made it all but certain

that the Federal Reserve will raise interest rates next week and signal the likelihood of additional rate hikes ahead.

Economists were mainly encouraged by the employment data.

"It's hard to find much to dislike in the February jobs report," said Michael Feroli, an economist at JPMorgan Chase, said.

About a quarter of the job gains occurred in construction, which added 58,000 jobs, the most in a decade. Unseasonably warm weather likely inflated that figure, economists said. Last month was the second-warmest February since 1895, according to the Commerce Department.

The February jobs data likely provided the final piece of evidence the Fed needed to raise rates after its next policy meeting Wednesday.

Cooperation, payments help VW avoid bigger penalty

DETROIT (AP) — By cooperating with federal investigators and quickly agreeing to compensate car owners, Volkswagen likely will avoid a massive criminal fine for cheating on diesel emissions tests and trying to cover it up.

The company on Friday pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice and conspiracy over a brazen scheme to program nearly 600,000 vehicles to deceive the Environmental Protection Agency.

VW also agreed to pay \$4.3 billion in criminal and civil penalties. While that is the largest-ever fine imposed by the U.S. government on an automaker, the company could have been on the hook for much more.

Federal sentencing guidelines called for fines from \$17 billion to \$34 billion due to the size of the plot and because VW employees destroyed documents and data after learning of the government investigation.

The crimes were well-planned and "went to a very high level in the corporate structure," Assistant U.S. Attorney John Neal told the court.



AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar, File

This 2013 file photo shows the logo on the grill of a Volkswagen on display in Pittsburgh. On Friday Volkswagen is expected to plead guilty to three criminal counts at a morning hearing in Detroit federal court for cheating on diesel emissions tests.

VW won't know its punishment for sure until sentenced April 21 by U.S. District Judge Sean Cox in Detroit. But prosecutors said that VW got a big discount on the penalty because it cooperated after fessing up to the crime.

The automaker's general counsel, Manfred Doess, who was in court to agree to the plea, acknowledged the scheme lasted for nine years, from 2006 to 2015, and went to the level of just below

the company's management board.

VW attorney Jason Weinstein said VW's cooperation enabled U.S. authorities to quickly file charges against six German supervisors in the case. Only one is in U.S. custody, though, and it's unlikely the others will be extradited from Germany. One U.S. employee also was charged.

"I've never seen a company act more swiftly or aggressively to hold itself

accountable for what it did wrong," Weinstein, a former federal prosecutor, told the court.

VW agreed to compensate owners for more than they would have received under criminal statutes, Neal said. Car owners combined will get up to \$11 billion for vehicle buybacks and compensation as part of a civil settlement agreed to last year. The company also agreed to environmental remediation and electric vehicle investment, and its behavior will be watched by a monitor for three years.

Although both sides asked Cox to sentence VW on Friday, Cox said he wanted more time to study the terms of the punishment — including a \$2.8 billion criminal fine. If Cox rejects the recommendation, VW can withdraw its plea. If the company wants to stick with a guilty plea, Cox still could order harsher penalties.

Montana considers keeping coal-fired plant afloat with loans

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Montana lawmakers are considering propping up a troubled coal-fired power plant by offering low-interest loans of up to \$10 million a year from the state's \$1 billion coal tax trust fund to one of the plant's owners.

Talen Energy, which owns 50 percent of the two Colstrip power plant units slated for closure by July 2022, has warned that the shutdown could come sooner if it does not receive tax relief or state assistance.

That led Rep. Jim Keane, D-Butte, to request the bill that would allow Talen to borrow up to \$10 million a year from the coal tax trust fund.

The bill, which Keane said will be sponsored by House Speaker Austin Knudsen, R-Culbertson, says the state Board of Investments can lend the money to Talen "to finance the everyday operations

and required maintenance" of the Colstrip units.

"It might not be the best way, but it is a way to help them," Keane said. "They can borrow from the state to hopefully keep them going."

Talen spokesman Todd Martin did not return a call for comment. State Sen. Duane Ankney, R-Colstrip, said the company was not involved in drafting the measure or two accompanying measures requiring decommissioning and cleanup plans for the shutdown.

Anne Hedges, the deputy director of the Montana Environmental Information Center, called the bill "wrongheaded." The state should first ensure that Talen will pay for its existing obligations, such as cleaning up the polluted site and paying its workers' pensions, before it gives the company money, she said.

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