

As new cars replace older ones, Colorado's auto emissions program is rapidly losing its relevance.

By The Denver Post Editorial Board The Denver Post

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There's nothing quite like spending a Saturday morning in metro Denver at an emissions testing center waiting for your vehicle's turn in line.

If you're like us, you can't decide which part of the ordeal you prefer. Is it the big chunk lost from your day or is it paying \$25 for the privilege of being told that your car does not in fact have a polluting problem?

In the larger scheme of things, of course, most of us don't mind doing our part. If the testing is needed to ensure we all can breathe clean air, then we're prepared for the sacrifice.

However, what if much or all of the testing is not needed for that worthwhile purpose?

In fact, that's precisely what a recent state audit concluded.

"Overall, the analysis performed by Sierra [Research Inc., an expert contractor] indicates that the ongoing public need for the AIR Program in its current form is uncertain, meaning that revamping or eliminating the program should be under consideration," the audit said.

The Department of Public Health and Environment already was on record favoring an extension of the current four-year model-year exemption to seven years. And on Thursday, the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission agreed, approving the seven-year waiver — the longest exemption of any similar program in the county, state officials contend.

That's good news, but we wish the regulators would have gone further. The state audit argues, for example, that adopting an exemption for model-year 2001 and newer vehicles would be both cost-effective and still maintain the bulk of the benefit the program provides.

As the audit explains, "Sierra's analysis indicates that the percentage of emissions reduction benefits from the AIR Program drops significantly beginning with model-year 2001 vehicles." Indeed, although "model-year 2001 and newer vehicles represented 64 percent of the vehicles tested," they provided "only 6 percent of the emissions reductions for hydrocarbons, 9 percent for carbon monoxide and 28 percent for nitrogen oxides."

~~Another modeling approach cited by the audit reached somewhat higher figures for hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide in post-2000 vehicles, but they were still much lower than those cars' percentage of the tested fleet.~~

And as the audit points out, exempting 2001 vehicles and newer would lower the program's overall cost from \$66.1 million to \$37.7 million — not to mention relieve many motorists of considerable inconvenience.

As new cars replace older ones, the emissions program is rapidly losing its relevance. A 2009 audit found 23 percent of the area fleet "consisted of vehicles from 1995 and older," while the current audit found just 13 percent of the fleet in that category.

At some point, the cost per ton of emissions-reduction benefit will simply not stand up to scrutiny.