Outboard and Personal Watercraft (PWC) Standards

In December 1998, the California Air Resources Board adopted emission standards for spark-ignition (i.e., gasoline) outboard engines and personal watercraft. These standards include progressive limits on exhaust emissions that are more stringent than current federal emission requirements. The standards first went into effect on year 2001 models with first-stage compliant engines achieving 75% greater emissions cleanliness on average than previous models. The standards also ensure that year 2008 outboard engines and personal watercraft will be approximately 90% cleaner than pre-regulated engines.

The standards also include labeling requirements for year 2001 and later engines. The manufacturers of these engines must permanently affix an emissions performance label and a star-label (see image below) to the engine in a readily visible location (cowling or hull). Additionally, a hang-tag must be affixed to the engine by the engine manufacturer or boat builder and must be displayed for all prospective buyers to see prior to sale. A hang-tag is a non-permanent label that indicates the relative cleanliness of the engine by displaying a graphic with a quantity of stars from one to four, with four stars representing the cleanest engines currently available. At present, the cleanest outboard engines and personal watercraft have been certified to a three-star rating.

A common misconception of many boaters is that the standards restrict boating on California lakes or reservoirs. This is not true. The standards are technology neutral and apply only to engine manufacturers, placing no obligations on existing boat owners. However, many water districts and other agencies that are responsible for managing access to California’s lakes, rivers, and reservoirs do place usage restrictions on outboard engines and personal watercraft based on the engine’s emissions certification level. If a reservoir is closed to certain types of boating, it is the result of a local water agency’s efforts, not the State’s. This is one reason why consumers should purchase boats with the cleanest engines available to protect their investment long into the future.

Inboard and Sterndrive Engines

In July 2001, the California Air Resources Board adopted additional emission standards for spark-ignition inboard and sterndrive marine engines. Implementation of these multi-phase standards commenced in 2003 and includes a catalyst-based emission limiting phase in 2007 for several engine models. The majority of year 2008 inboard and sterndrive engines in California will be equipped with catalysts, enabling them to comply with the stringent emission requirements adopted by the Board. Currently, there are no federal emission requirements for inboard and sterndrive engines. In addition to making vessels with California-certified inboard and sterndrive engines the cleanest type of pleasurecraft currently available, the incorporated three-way catalysts should all but eliminate the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning to vessel occupants. This should be a considerable incentive for boaters to purchase boats with new California-certified year 2008 or later engines.

The labeling requirements for inboard and sterndrive engines are similar to those for outboard engines and personal watercraft such that engine manufacturers must permanently affix an emissions performance label and a star label to their 2003 and later engines, and that hang tags must be displayed to prospective buyers at the time of sale. The cleanest inboard and sterndrive engines (i.e., those certified to catalyst emission levels) are available with four-star ratings.

For more information visit the Air Resources Board at www.arb.ca.gov or call (800) 242-4450