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State headlight law tied to use of wipers

By Amy Oakes
STAFF WRITER

California drivers soon will have to flip on their headlights when the weather is wet enough that their wiper blades are in constant motion.

The concept might be new for some drivers, so they have six months to start the new habit. The law goes into effect July 1.

"It's not something very difficult," said California Highway Patrol Officer Lorenzo Ruano. "It's just people getting used to it."

The law states that drivers of all motor vehicles, except motorcycles, must turn on their headlights when they use their windshield wipers in rain, mist, snow, fog or other precipitation. Headlights also must be turned on when drivers cannot clearly see a person or vehicle 1,000 feet away.

Ruano said many new vehicles have lights that are automatically on when the engine is running. Those drivers will not need to turn on their headlights when their windshield wipers are on.

As for enforcement, Ruano said, it will be at the officers' discretion. "If it's raining, the officer will probably be doing other stuff," he said.

Violators will be cited. Ruano said the penalty will be determined by the courts.

The rain this week caused many traffic problems. On Tuesday, 243 collisions were reported in San Diego County between midnight and 10 p.m., the CHP said. That number included only accidents on freeways and unincorporated roads under the CHP's jurisdiction.

Ruano said drivers should use common sense if they have doubts about whether to turn on their headlights and windshield wipers. If the majority of vehicles are using their wipers, he said, "you should probably have yours on."

"I probably would have done it automatically," said Darlene La Madrid as she left the AAA office in Chula Vista. "It never occurred to me that it would be a law."

The 69-year-old Chula Vista resident said that although she didn't know about the new law, she wouldn't have to change her habits. The lights on her 2002 Buick Park Avenue turn on when she starts the engine.

The law was written by former Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto. Simitian is now a state senator representing District 11, which

includes San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.

Simitian said the law was proposed by two women in his district who submitted ideas in his annual "It Ought to be a Law" contest. His Assembly district includes all or part of 13 cities in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Simitian held the contest for three years, usually picking a few entries to become proposed legislation. Six bills from those contests have become laws.

"It's everyday people coming up with everyday solutions," Simitian said.

He said he wasn't enthusiastic about the headlights proposal at first. But after he did some research, he found that at least a dozen other states required the use of headlights when windshield wipers are on.

"There's a demonstrable improvement in highway safety during inclement weather," he said.

Simitian met with transportation officials and the CHP to discuss the concept. Having the law go into effect in July, he said, gives drivers time to get used to the practice.

"The goal is not for everyone to get a ticket," he said. "The goal is for everyone to drive safely."

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Headlight law

Benefits of new rule are easy to spot

REDUCTION IN CRASHES
MEANS RAINY WEATHER
WILL BE FAR LESS NASTY

Wacky weather splattered the Bay Area with everything from hail to funnel clouds through late spring. Thunderstorms shed monsoon-like rains. Since last July, 24.27 inches of rain have drenched San Jose — nearly 10 inches more than normal.

Today, in the midst of a newly arrived heat wave, a California law geared to driving in inclement weather goes into effect. The new code states that drivers of all motor vehicles, except

motorcycles, must turn on their headlights when they use their windshield wipers in rain, mist, snow, fog or other precipitation.

Break the rule and you face a ticket and fine of up to \$96. Like most new legislation, this bill could have gone into effect Jan. 1, when the rainy season was really getting under way. But Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, the bill's author, says he wanted to give the public ample time to adjust to the new law — especially since it's a ticketable offense.

Now that we've adjusted, let's review why this is a good law. According to statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, headlights help reduce the risk of both fatal and non-fatal crashes. About 58 percent of fatal crashes and 42 percent of all crashes in the United States occur at night or when visibility is reduced.

The aim of the law as Simitian sees it is simple: to save lives. Now, if we can just remember the law when the weather turns nasty again.