Ohio lawmakers want to end E-Check emissions testing. Will Trump Administration approve?

By **Jeremy Pelzer**
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio—Ohio lawmakers have moved to dismantle the state's mandatory E-Check program, under which vehicles registered in Cuyahoga County and the six surrounding counties must get their emissions tested every two years.

The only remaining barrier now is to get the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to end the E-Check requirement for Northeast Ohio – something Ohio lawmakers are hopeful will happen under the second Trump administration.

Ohio's recently signed transportation budget provides an alternate system, where vehicle owners sign an attestation that they own a vehicle that qualifies for testing and that it meets emissions standards. That would replace traveling to an inspection site.

But House Republicans have proposed abolishing the requirement altogether as part of their two-year operating budget plan -- provided that the feds agree it is no longer needed.

Both scenarios require federal approval.

Ohio started monitoring vehicle emissions in the 1990s as a way to help the Cleveland-Akron area comply with air-quality standards set in the federal Clean Air Act. Such emissions testing is currently required in all or part of 28 states, according to the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

Under Ohio's program, vehicles between four and 25 years old and that weigh 10,000 pounds or less must be inspected every two years at test facilities around the area. Those that are found to be discharging too many pollutants in the air must be repaired.

Pros and cons

Supporters of the program say it's a low-cost way to comply with federal air-pollution standards and prevent greenhouse gases and pollutants from entering the atmosphere.

In 2022, E-Check testing of nearly 797,000 vehicles in Northeast Ohio prevented the release of an estimated 316 tons of nitrogen oxides, 205 tons of volatile organic compounds, and 10,350 tons of carbon monoxide, according to the most recent report on the program from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

Ohio's seven E-Check counties got mixed air-quality grades from the American Lung Association in 2024: Lake, Medina, and Portage counties each got "A" grades regarding particle pollution, but Cuyahoga and Summit each only received a "C" (Geauga and Lorain counties were not given particle pollution grades in the report).

County grades for ozone ranged from "B" for Geauga and Medina counties to an "F" for Lake County, according to the report.

E-Check critics note that air quality in Northeast Ohio has significantly improved in the past 30 years, and that mandatory testing has only continued because the Obama administration put into place tougher air-quality standards in 2015.

The program is also not only inconvenient for all Northeast Ohio drivers, but particular a "huge burden" on the working poor who rely on older cars and can't afford to pay hundreds of dollars on repairs to make them E-Check compliant, said state Rep. Bill Roemer, a Richfield Republican who's worked for years to roll back the E-Check program.

The first three Ohio E-Check tests within a 365-day period are free, but subsequent tests cost $18 each.

Roemer said mandatory E-Check testing results in wasted gasoline and unneeded emissions from having to drive every two years to the nearest testing facility, which often is far away. Roemer said he personally has to drive each of his cars 30 miles round trip from his house to get tested.

In addition, Roemer said, the nearly $14 million the state has budgeted for the E-Check program this fiscal year would be better spent on things like education or property tax relief.

Ohio EPA Director Anne Vogel, in a letter to Roemer in 2023, stated that while Northeast Ohio air quality has improved over the past three decades, "the E-Check program must remain in effect because the air quality in Northeast Ohio continues to violate the federal air quality standard for ozone."

The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com has reached out to the Ohio EPA for comment.

Eliminating E-Check?

Ohio's new transportation budget, signed by Gov. Mike DeWine last week, allows Northeast Ohioans to comply with the E-Check program without driving to a testing facility by asking the Ohio EPA for an "alternative emissions certificate."

To get such a certificate, each applicant has to attest that they own the vehicle in question and that it "complies with all laws of Ohio and the United States governing motor vehicle emissions."

However, that alternative system can't go into effect until the U.S. EPA gives Ohio permission, according to Roemer, who co-authored the measure.

The state's main operating budget plan, currently being worked on in the Ohio House, would go even further. As currently written, it would require the Ohio EPA to immediately discontinue the E-Check program if the U.S. EPA determines that the E-Check program isn't necessary for Ohio to comply with the federal Clean Air Act.

Another part of the budget bill would require the Ohio EPA to assess whether the current E-Check program is necessary and submit its findings to state lawmakers within 18 months after the budget is signed into law.

What happens now?

It remains to be seen whether the U.S. EPA will either allow Ohio's "alternative emissions certificate" plan or permit the state to end its E-Check program altogether.

Ohio lawmakers have passed multiple non-binding resolutions in recent years asking the federal government to end the state's mandatory E-Check program, but such calls have so far gone unanswered – including during the first Trump administration.

However, Roemer said he's now "very hopeful" that the new U.S. EPA administrator, Lee Zeldin, will give Ohio the green light, given that he has already rolled back more than 30 other federal environmental regulations.

When asked what Zeldin intends to do, the U.S. EPA's press office didn't directly answer. Rather, the office replied with an unattributed statement saying the agency is committed to working closely with Ohio to meet the state's air-quality goals while also helping the economy and avoiding undue costs or government red tape.

The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com has reached out to a spokeswoman for U.S. Rep. Dave Joyce, a Geauga County Republican who has lobbied the U.S. EPA to end Ohio's E-Check program.