

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE · CALIFORNIA

California Car Registration, Smog Check and FasTrak Guide 2026

For cars brought from another state, cars bought in California, and the state's toll roads.

SHORT ANSWER

New residents must pay vehicle registration fees to DMV within 20 days of moving, even if some documents are still missing. The order is: California insurance of at least \$30,000/\$60,000/\$15,000, a smog check if required, then registration at DMV with Form REG 343. California's toll brand is FasTrak, but there is no single statewide billing system: Los Angeles's I-10/I-110 ExpressLanes, Bay Area bridges, and Orange County's toll roads each run separate accounts.

Step by step

- 1 Buy California insurance.** For a policy issued or renewed on or after January 1, 2025, the minimum is \$30,000 per person, \$60,000 per accident, and \$15,000 in property damage (rising to \$50,000/\$100,000/\$25,000 on January 1, 2035).
- 2 Get a smog check if required.** Gasoline vehicles from model year 1976 on (motorcycles exempt), diesel vehicles from 1998 on under 14,001 lb, and natural gas or propane vehicles of the same weight class need a smog certificate when they come from out of state. The certificate is valid for 90 days from the inspection. Periodic smog checks after registration apply in 33 counties, according to the DMV; check your own county's status with the DMV.
- 3 Complete Form REG 343.** All vehicle owners must sign it.
- 4 Gather your out-of-state paperwork.** Your last title (or a California card marked "Nontransferable"), your last registration certificate or renewal notice, and a REG 31 Verification of Vehicle signed by an authorized DMV employee, law enforcement officer, or licensed vehicle verifier.
- 5 Turn in your out-of-state plates,** unless they are expired or registered under an interstate agreement.
- 6 Pay the fees within 20 days.** Apply on time even if your title or smog certificate is still missing, to avoid a late penalty.

California bars bringing in or registering a vehicle less than 2 years old with less than 7,500 miles unless it was built to California emissions standards or qualifies for an exemption (REG 256F).

Smog check exemptions

- Gasoline vehicles from model year 1975 or older.
- Diesel vehicles from 1997 or older, or over 14,000 lb.
- Natural gas vehicles over 14,000 lb.

- Electric vehicles.
- Some gasoline vehicles under 8 model years old may pay a \$20 smog abatement fee instead of testing.

Fees (2026)

ITEM	AMOUNT
Registration base fee (includes the alternative fuel/technology fee)	about \$76
Vehicle License Fee	0.65% of vehicle value
CHP (California Highway Patrol) fee, standard	\$34
CHP fee, CVRA (heavier commercial) vehicles	\$56
Transportation Improvement Fee	\$33-\$231 by vehicle value
Smog abatement fee (where applicable)	\$20
Late penalty	From about \$10 (1-10 days late) up to \$100+ (over two years late), plus a percentage penalty on the Vehicle License Fee

INSURANCE MINIMUMS

For a policy issued or renewed on or after January 1, 2025, the minimum liability coverage is \$30,000 per person, \$60,000 per accident, and \$15,000 property damage (Vehicle Code §16056), rising to \$50,000/\$100,000/\$25,000 on January 1, 2035. Existing policies usually pick up the new minimums at their next renewal, not immediately.

FasTrak: statewide toll roads

California's toll brand is FasTrak, but there is no single billing system behind it. Bay Area bridges, Orange County's toll roads (73, 133, 241, 261), and Los Angeles's I-10/I-110 ExpressLanes each run their own account system; a FasTrak transponder generally works across all of them and some other U.S. toll networks.

Los Angeles: Metro ExpressLanes (I-10, I-110)

TOPIC	DETAILS
Opening an account with a credit card	\$40 initial balance, \$10 replenishment threshold, no transponder deposit
Opening an account with cash or check	\$50 initial balance, \$25 replenishment threshold, \$25 transponder deposit
Monthly maintenance fee	\$1 (waived for the Low-Income Assistance Plan)
Driving without a tag	First notice: toll plus a \$9 processing fee, due within 30 days. If unpaid, add \$16, then \$30; a DMV registration hold or collections is possible

TOPIC	DETAILS
Clean Air Vehicle discount	Ended October 1, 2025, no longer available

On Orange County's toll roads (The Toll Roads), drivers without an account can pay online or through the app up to 5 days before or after driving. Bay Area bridges are entirely cashless.

NOTE FOR IMMIGRANTS

Toll bills go to the address on your vehicle registration, so update both your DMV registration and your FasTrak/ExpressLanes account after you move. If you are subject to the address-reporting requirement, you must also report your new address to USCIS within 10 days (AR-11).



TURKISH-SPEAKING IMMIGRATION ATTORNEY IN CALIFORNIA

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