

New Driving Response regulations For Los Angeles FD.

It's better for us to do than to have some else make regulations for us

Fire Engine Limits Set;

Under changes expected this year, drivers face speed restrictions. Rules are aimed at reducing accidents with motorists who fail to yield.

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A string of accidents involving motorists who failed to yield to sirens and flashing lights has prompted the Los Angeles Fire Department to issue new guidelines for firetruck drivers that officials said could slow emergency response times.

For the first time, there would be speed limits for firetrucks, and drivers stuck in traffic would be required to turn off their sirens and wait until the gridlock cleared rather than try to maneuver around vehicles.

Fire officials drafted the rules after an internal review showed that fire vehicles had been involved in 824 accidents from 1999 through 2001.

The review did not determine the cause of the accidents, but officials believe most occurred because motorists failed to yield to firetrucks.

Better soundproofing and stereo systems in cars, along with cell phones and other distractions, contribute to the problem, officials said. "It's really dangerous. On every run, there is someone who doesn't stop," said paramedic Janet Morris, whose ambulance has been struck twice by motorists who didn't yield.

"It's on every driving test, but probably 50% of the people don't obey it," added firefighter John Cano, an engine driver for 19 years.

On any given night at Fire Station 35 in Hollywood, Cano said, the flashing red lights and wailing siren do not part the sea of cars in his path.

Many drivers seem either unwilling to yield or not sure what to do when they hear a roaring siren. Instead of pulling to the right and stopping, some pull to the left, some stop where they are and others just keep going.

Firefighters are then forced to second-guess drivers and weave their way around cars blocking their path, sometimes driving into oncoming traffic, said Capt. Craig Nielsen, a driving coordinator for the Los Angeles Fire Department.

"It requires us to maneuver a lot more than would be necessary," he said.

Battalion Chief Bob Franco was more blunt: "They think where they are going is more important than where we are going."

Traffic laws require emergency vehicles to operate with "due regard to

safety," and the Fire Department's driving policy allows firefighters to use their own discretion when racing to emergencies.

Firefighters can travel at any speed they deem safe, based on the time of day, traffic and road conditions. Although there are no speed limits, firefighters are required to stop at all red lights and stop signs, and wait for traffic to clear before proceeding with caution.

The changes, expected to be implemented this year, would impose a variety of speed limits on drivers. Firetrucks would be prohibited from going more than 10 mph above the posted speed limit. Firetrucks driving into opposing traffic lanes and through intersections could travel no faster than 20 mph.

Under the rules, firetrucks trapped in traffic must shut down their sirens and wait with other motorists for the congestion to clear instead of pushing their way through. Fire officials said they don't want to force firetruck drivers into potentially dangerous situations, such as driving into intersections or into oncoming traffic.

Fire departments across the nation have been grappling with how to reduce accidents. According to federal statistics, motor vehicle collisions are the second leading cause of death for firefighters.

Some fire departments are experimenting with "on the quiet" response policies, which virtually eliminate the use of red lights and sirens when responding to emergencies. Proponents said it makes more sense to use the siren only in the most serious cases.

Other departments have installed strobe lights onto firetrucks, which automatically turn traffic lights to green so that firefighters have the right of way.

Los Angeles police and fire officials plan to team up to crack down on motorists who fail to yield. Beginning this fall, motorcycle officers will drive next to firetrucks on the way to emergency calls, pulling over drivers who don't obey the sirens.

Fire officials hope this will help.

"What if somebody failed to pull to the right and it delayed response times, and it was your mother, your father, your sister -- do you think people's attitude would change? I think so," said Kyle Zuniga, driving coordinator for the Los Angeles County Fire Department. "Most people don't give it a second thought."