

INFORMATION BULLETIN



April 8, 2021

WARNING LIGHTS AND FLASHING LIGHTS

The widespread use of light-emitting diode technology has made it possible to install lighting of any color and operation virtually anywhere on a vehicle. Many special hazard vehicles, such as construction vehicles and tow trucks, are being equipped with different types and colors of flashing lights, some of which are not permitted. This Information Bulletin (IB) provides information regarding warning-light and flashing-light requirements.

For the purposes of this IB, the terms lamp, light, and illuminating device have the same meaning. Refer to CHP 884, Warning Lamps for Authorized Emergency Vehicles and Special Hazard Vehicles, for a summary of required and permitted lighting devices on authorized emergency vehicles (AEV) and other special hazard vehicles. The CHP 884 can be found under the Forms dropdown menu on the CHP Intranet site.

Section 24003 of the California Vehicle Code (CVC) states:

No vehicle shall be equipped with any lamp or illuminating device not required or permitted in this code, nor shall any lamp or illuminating device be mounted inside a vehicle unless specifically permitted by this code.

Article 7 of Division 12 CVC and Section 25301 CVC specify conditions when flashing lights may be displayed, and the vehicles which are required or permitted to be equipped with warning lights. Excessive use and misuse of flashing lights and warning lights reduces public recognition of their purpose, and decreases the effectiveness of the lights.

Section 30 CVC states:

It is declared as a matter of legislative policy that red lights and sirens on vehicles should be restricted to AEV engaged in police, fire, and lifesaving services, and that other types of vehicles which are engaged in activities which



create special hazards upon the highways should be equipped with flashing amber warning lamps.

Section 25268 CVC states:

No person shall display a flashing amber warning light on a vehicle as permitted by this code except when an unusual traffic hazard exists.

Section 25269 CVC states:

No person shall display a flashing or steady burning red warning light on a vehicle except as permitted by Section 21055 CVC, or when an extreme hazard exists.

With the exception of a school bus, AEV, or armored car, warning lights on vehicles are required to be amber in color. Amber warning lights authorized by Sections 25260.4, 25270, and 25281 CVC are required to be removed or covered when not in use.

Section 25257 CVC requires every school bus to be equipped with a flashing red light signal system. Additionally, school buses manufactured on or after July 1, 1993, are required to be equipped with an amber warning light system, and a school bus manufactured prior to that date may be equipped with an amber warning light system. The warning lights on a school bus may only be activated in compliance with Section 22112 CVC. Finally, pursuant to Section 25257.7 CVC, a school bus may display a flashing white strobe light when atmospheric conditions reduce visibility to 500 feet or less.

Section 25252 CVC requires every AEV to be equipped with at least one steady burning red warning light visible to the front of the vehicle. An AEV is also permitted to display the following lights:

- Steady burning, revolving, or flashing red warning lights to the front, sides, or rear of the vehicle pursuant to Section 25252 CVC.
- Flashing amber warning lights, and steady burning or flashing white warning lights pursuant to Section 25259 CVC.
- Flashing white light from a gaseous discharge lamp designed and used to control traffic signals pursuant to Section 25258 CVC.
- Upper-beam headlamps flashing alternately (wig-wag) from one side of the vehicle to the other side of the vehicle in compliance with Section 25252.5 CVC.



- Steady burning or flashing blue warning light when used by a peace officer in the performance of their duties, described in Section 25258 CVC.

Warning lights on an AEV must be used in compliance with the statute requiring or permitting the display of the lights, as well as Sections 21055, 25268, and 25269 CVC.

An armored car may be equipped with steady burning or flashing red lights pursuant to Section 25262 CVC. The lights may only be used while resisting an armed robbery.

Section 25250 CVC prohibits flashing lights on vehicles unless permitted or required by another section of the CVC. The following are examples of permitted, required, or prohibited flashing lights:

- A vehicle has the turn signal lamps flashing simultaneously on the front and rear, and on each side of the vehicle (four-way flashers), as it approaches and passes a large box in the traffic lane. The use of these lamps in this manner is permitted by Section 25251(a)(3) CVC.
- After performing a pretrip inspection on a commercial vehicle, the driver determines that the taillamps on the trailer at the rear of a combination of vehicles are inoperative. It is during the hours of darkness, so the driver activates the four-way flashers and drives the vehicle. This use of the four-way flashers is not permitted by Section 25251 CVC and, therefore, a violation of Section 25250 CVC.
- The two brake lamps and center high-mounted brake lamp on a tow truck flash when the warning lights are activated. Brake lamps may only flash when in compliance with Sections 25251(d) and 25251.4 CVC; therefore, these flashing lights are a violation of Section 25250 CVC.
- A pilot car required by an extralegal permit pursuant to Section 35780 CVC, or any vehicle or combination of vehicles subject to the permit if specified in the permit, displays flashing amber and white warning lights. The amber warning light is required pursuant to Section 25270 CVC. However, the white warning light is a violation of Section 24003 CVC.
- A traffic control vehicle used by a construction crew on the freeway displays flashing amber and white warning lights as it is driven at freeway speed from the construction site to a location off the freeway. The display of the white warning light is a violation of Section 24003 CVC. This vehicle may display an amber warning light, pursuant to Section 25256 CVC, when parked or working upon the highway. This vehicle is doing neither; therefore, the display of the flashing amber warning light is a violation of Section 25250 CVC. Additionally, in this



scenario, no unusual traffic hazard exists; therefore, the display of the flashing amber warning light is a violation of Section 25268 CVC.

- A fire truck is displaying steady burning and flashing green warning lights while responding to an emergency call for service. The display of green warning lights is not permitted by the CVC; therefore, this is a violation of Section 24003 CVC.
- An ambulance driven by a paramedic is displaying a flashing blue warning light while responding to an emergency call for service. Blue warning lights are only permitted on an AEV used by a peace officer described in Section 25258 CVC; therefore, the flashing blue warning lights are a violation of Section 24003 CVC.
- A private security vehicle marked as required by Section 25279 CVC is equipped with amber warning lights mounted inside the windshield and rear window. Although this vehicle is permitted to be equipped with amber warning lights, Section 25279 CVC does not specify that the lights may be mounted inside the vehicle; therefore, the warning lights are a violation of Section 24003 CVC.
- A private company has equipped a vehicle with warning lights for use as a demonstration vehicle for sales purposes. While the vehicle is driven from location to location upon the highway, the warning lights are never activated. Unless the vehicle is defined as an AEV, this vehicle is not permitted to be equipped with warning lights. Although the warning lights are never activated while the vehicle is upon the highway, a violation of Section 24003 CVC exists.

Questions regarding this IB may be directed to the Commercial Vehicle Section, at (916) 843-3400.

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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