

O'Malley signs bill to curb vehicle emissions

Voting reforms for ex-convicts also among 178 measures signed into law

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Gov. Martin O'Malley signed into law today legislation to require stricter emissions limits on new cars, bills to protect the diamondback terrapin and restore the Chesapeake Bay's oyster population, as well as a controversial measure to allow ex-convicts to vote.

In a legislative session when attempts to tackle major issues such as health-care expansion failed amid concerns about the state budget, environmental proposals gained widespread and often bipartisan support. O'Malley said the success of the legislation is evidence of the long-standing consensus in Maryland behind environmental protection.

"Without a divisive debate and a veto and a veto override, a lot of this slipped through without a lot of attention," O'Malley said. "I'm inclined to veto all of these so we can go back and pass them all over again because it felt so good."

The highest profile environmental bill of the legislative session, which adjourned earlier this month, was the "Clean Cars Act," which requires Maryland to adopt the emissions standards imposed by California rather than those mandated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The bill also requires a reduction of the average carbon dioxide emissions of cars sold in the state beginning in 2010, which will likely mean that cars sold in the state will get higher gas mileage.

Other environmental legislation signed into law today included a bill to allow the state to lease parcels of the Chesapeake Bay floor to oyster restoration projects; a prohibition on the commercial harvest of diamondback terrapins and a limit on recreational harvest to three per person; and a requirement that the state adopt strict new regulations to manage storm water runoff.

Among the 178 bills signed into law today, the most closely fought was the "Voting Registration Protection Act," which allows any convicted felon who has served his or her sentence, including parole and probation, to register to vote.

Advocates say the move re-enfranchises as many as 50,000 Marylanders, though its supporters in the General Assembly say they don't expect it will have a significant impact

on the electorate.

"It certainly doesn't mean the floodgates are going to open, but for this underscores the full meaning of citizenship," said Sen. Gwendolyn Britt, a Prince George's County Democrat who sponsored the measure. "When you have paid your debt to society ... you should be free to register to vote."

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