

On the road again; Government gives OK to some U.S.-bought cars

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While many Canadians have been grumbling about navigating snow- and ice-covered roads, Amherstview's Amarjit Sandhu has never been so happy behind the wheel.

That's because Sandhu is one of about 1,000 Canadians who have been told by the federal government that they can finally drive the vehicles they bought in the U.S. before importation rules were suddenly changed on them without warning.

"I drive it at every available opportunity, even when I don't really have to," Sandhu said of the 2008 Nissan Maxima he bought in Colorado last month.

The car doesn't yet have snow tires and Sandhu has never bothered with them, but this year he might invest in a set after he claims he saved about \$10,000 by shopping in the U.S.

After purchasing the car, but before getting it back into Canada, Transport Canada changed the importation rules for several cars, including the Maxima. It said they could no longer be driven in this country because manufacturers claimed their anti-theft immobilizers didn't meet the same standard as Canadian ones.

Keen to protect his investment, Sandhu sought redress by joining an Internet-based information campaign called Cars Without Borders - carswithoutborders.ca - co-launched by Gananoque native Robert Lamb, a retired Nortel senior manager who now lives in Kirkland, Que.

Using a cleverly co-ordinated media campaign, within days they won headlines in newspapers across the country and last week, the federal government made an order in council that allows all those car buyers to drive their vehicles after undertaking an anti-theft system certification inspection.

Sandhu had his car inspected last Friday and got his licence plates the same day. Then he took his children Christmas shopping in the car.

"We all felt the car was finally home," he said.

Many motor vehicle manufacturers have dropped prices and are offering larger purchasing incentives in the wake of the high Canadian dollar and low auto prices in the U.S. Many are advertising a Canadian price reduction on new vehicles.

Earlier this year, Transport Canada decided that all cars manufactured after September 2007 had to have factory-installed immobilizers that met rigorous Canadian standards.

The regulation was instituted to curb vehicle theft and related road injuries.

In November, many cars were suddenly determined uncertifiable.

Sandhu's Maxima did have a factory-installed immobilizer.

But Transport Canada left it up to vehicle manufacturers to say whether the immobilizers in the cars they sell in the U.S. are up to Canadian standards.

Sandhu and others from Cars Without Borders argued that manufacturers shouldn't have a say in which cars are up to standard because they have an interest in keeping prices high.

Apparently, the government agreed, at least with the idea of involving manufacturers in the certification process.

Transport Canada's newest changes to the Motor Vehicle Safety Regulations ensure that manufacturers no longer have a say in whether a car's immobilization system is certifiable.

"I think it's a [speed] record for changing regulation," Lamb said. He bought a 2008 Honda Civic in the U.S. for his 20-year-old daughter that she couldn't drive until last week.

The Cars Without Borders website was launched on Nov. 21. Within nine days, the federal government proposed changes to the regulations.

The usual 60-day consultation process was trimmed to 15 days and the new regulation was registered within three days.

Lamb said the Cars Without Borders campaign achieved everything intended, but there are more battles to come, including a campaign against a bumper regulation that is creating similar trade barriers. Transport Canada has asked the Cars Without Borders Group to comment on that issue as well, Lamb said.

"The big thing here is to take down the wall ... and allow Canadians to improve their standard of living," he said.

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