



California Car Title Transfer Checklist

California title transfers split responsibility between the seller and buyer. The seller must file a Notice of Transfer and Release of Liability (REG 138, also called NRL) with the DMV within 5 calendar days of the sale to remove their liability for the vehicle. The buyer must then submit the signed title and the rest of the transfer paperwork to a DMV office within 10 days. A current smog certificate is required for most gasoline-powered vehicles 1976 and newer that are over 4 years old; the seller is responsible for providing it. California also requires the buyer to pay use tax (state sales tax rate plus local district tax) at the DMV during registration — the DMV calculates this based on the declared purchase price.

QUICK ANSWER

California title transfers must be submitted to a CA DMV office within 10 days of the sale date. Notarization is generally not required for standard private-party transfers. Use the CA DMV online fee calculator for an accurate estimate of the title transfer and registration fees due.

KEY FACTS

State	California
Agency	California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV)
Process	Online · In person · By mail
Notary required	No
Bill of sale	Conditional
Odometer disclosure	Yes
Filing deadline	5 days
Last reviewed	May 21, 2026

QUICK REFERENCE

NOTARY No	BILL OF SALE Conditional	ODOMETER Yes	INSPECTION Conditional
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IMPORTANT DEADLINES

Within 5 days

Seller files Notice of Transfer and Release of Liability (REG 138) within 5 calendar days of the sale Without the NRL, the seller can remain liable for parking tickets, tolls, and the vehicle's actions until the buyer registers.

Within 10 days

Buyer transfers the title and registers the vehicle within 10 days of the sale

Deadline

Late transfer penalty applies after 10 days Penalty amount increases with the length of delay (sourceNeeded — verify current schedule).

PRINTABLE CHECKLIST

Buyer checklist

- ☐ **Signed title from seller** **REQUIRED**
Verify the seller signed line 1 on the back and the title has no whiteout, alterations, or missing fields.
- ☐ **Current smog certificate (if required)** **CONDITIONAL**
Required for most gasoline vehicles 1976 and newer that are over 4 model-years old.
- ☐ **Application for Title or Registration (REG 343, if separate from registration)** **CONDITIONAL**
[Form REG 343](#)
- ☐ **Statement of Facts (REG 256) for gift transfers or family exemptions** **CONDITIONAL**
[Form REG 256](#)
- ☐ **Government-issued photo ID** **REQUIRED**



- ☐ **Proof of California insurance** **REQUIRED**
Insurance meeting California minimum liability limits, in the buyer's name.

- ☐ **Payment for title fee, use tax, VLF, and registration fees** **REQUIRED**

Seller checklist

- ☐ **Signed California title (line 1 of back)** **REQUIRED**
Sign exactly as your name appears on the front. Do not use whiteout or alter the title.
- ☐ **Current smog certificate (if required)** **CONDITIONAL**
Provided to the buyer at no cost. Valid for 90 days from the test date.
- ☐ **File REG 138 (NRL) within 5 days of sale** **REQUIRED**
[Form REG 138](#)
Submit online at dmv.ca.gov or mail to the DMV. Critical for releasing seller liability.
- ☐ **Lien release letter (if there was a loan)** **CONDITIONAL**
Lender must provide a release before the title can transfer.
- ☐ **Odometer disclosure on the title** **REQUIRED**

Required forms

- ☐ **REG 138 — Notice of Transfer and Release of Liability (NRL)** **REQUIRED**
[Form REG 138](#)
Seller's filing. Must be submitted to the DMV within 5 days of the sale, online or by mail.
- ☐ **REG 343 — Application for Title or Registration** **CONDITIONAL**
[Form REG 343](#)
Used when the buyer is applying for a new title without simultaneously registering.
- ☐ **REG 256 — Statement of Facts** **CONDITIONAL**
[Form REG 256](#)
Used to disclose family transfer exemptions, low-value transfers, gift transfers, or to correct title information.
- ☐ **REG 227 — Application for Duplicate or Paperless Title** **CONDITIONAL**
[Form REG 227](#)
Required if the seller lost the original title and needs to obtain a duplicate before transferring.
- ☐ **REG 135 — Bill of Sale** **RECOMMENDED**
[Form REG 135](#)
Official California bill of sale template. Not required but strongly recommended.

FEES

sourceNeeded — verify with current DMV fee schedule — Title transfer fee (California's DMV fee calculator returns the exact title fee for your vehicle based on type, value, and county. Confirm before paying.)

Statewide base 7.25% + local district tax (~0.10–2.50%) — Vehicle Use Tax (state + local) (Collected by the DMV at registration. Family gift transfers to qualifying relatives may be exempt — declare on Form REG 256.)

sourceNeeded — built into annual registration — California Highway Patrol (CHP) fee (Part of the annual registration renewal charged at the same DMV visit.)

0.65% of vehicle value — Vehicle License Fee (VLF) (VLF is California's annual in-lieu-of-property-tax fee, based on the depreciated value of the vehicle. It is recalculated each year.)

sourceNeeded — increases with delay — Transfer penalty (late filing) (California assesses transfer penalties that escalate after 30, 31–75, and 76+ days late. Check the DMV penalty schedule for current amounts.)

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

Notary: No — California does not require notarization for standard private-party title transfers. The seller's signature on the back of the title is sufficient.

Bill of sale: Conditional — California does not require a bill of sale for a standard private-party transfer — the signed title and Statement of Facts (REG 256, if needed) are the primary documents. A bill of sale (REG 135) is strongly recommended to document price, date, and the buyer/seller's information.

Odometer disclosure: Yes — Required for vehicles less than 10 years old. The seller completes the odometer disclosure section on the back of the California title.

Inspection: Conditional — A current biennial smog certificate is required for most gasoline-powered vehicles model year 1976 or newer that are more than 4 years old. Exemptions: vehicles 4 model-years old or newer, diesel vehicles 1997 and older with GVWR 14,000 lbs and under, fully electric, hybrid, and motorcycles. The seller provides the smog certificate at no cost to the buyer.



Plates: California plates stay with the vehicle in a private-party sale — the buyer keeps the existing plates and re-registers the vehicle in their name. Special-interest, personalized, or environmental plates may be retained by the seller via Application for Replacement Plates (REG 156).

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

- 1 Confirm the seller is the titled owner of record on the front of the California title.
- 2 Check that the seller has a current, valid smog certificate (if required for the vehicle).
- 3 Seller signs line 1 on the back of the title in the seller's signature section and completes the odometer disclosure.
- 4 Seller provides the buyer with the signed title, smog certificate, and bill of sale (REG 135 recommended).
- 5 Seller files Notice of Transfer and Release of Liability (REG 138) online at dmv.ca.gov within 5 days of the sale.
- 6 Buyer obtains California liability insurance in the buyer's name before going to the DMV.
- 7 Buyer makes a DMV appointment (walk-ins are accepted but appointments are faster).
- 8 Buyer brings the signed title, smog certificate, photo ID, proof of insurance, and any required forms (REG 343 or REG 256) to the DMV.
- 9 Buyer pays the title fee, use tax (state + local), vehicle license fee, and registration fees at the DMV.
- 10 Buyer receives temporary registration; the new title arrives by mail in approximately 60 days.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Seller skipping the REG 138 NRL filing within 5 days — leaves seller liable for parking tickets, tolls, and incidents the buyer causes before registering.
- Buyer missing the 10-day title transfer deadline — penalty fees apply and escalate with the length of delay.
- Selling without a current smog certificate when required — the buyer cannot register the vehicle until the smog test is done, which can stall the sale.
- Using whiteout, scratch-outs, or corrections on the title — California voids any altered title and requires a duplicate via REG 227.
- Listing a below-market price on the title to reduce use tax — the DMV may reassess based on Kelley Blue Book or similar value.
- Forgetting REG 256 Statement of Facts for family or gift transfers — without it, the transaction is taxed instead of using the exemption.
- Buyer arriving at the DMV without California insurance in their name — DMV cannot complete registration without it.
- Out-of-state vehicle transfers attempted without a California smog certificate — most non-exempt out-of-state vehicles must pass California smog before first registration here.

OFFICIAL SOURCES

California DMV — Transfer of Title

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/titles/title-transfers-and-changes/>

California DMV — Notice of Transfer and Release of Liability (REG 138)

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/file/notice-of-transfer-and-release-of-liability-reg-138-pdf/>

California DMV — Smog Inspections

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/smog-inspections/>

California DMV — Registration Fees

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/registration-fees/>

California DMV — Registration Penalties

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/registration-fees/penalties/>

California DMV — Application Forms (REG 343, 256, 227, 135)

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/vehicle-registration/>

California DMV

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov>

CA DMV Forms

<https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/forms/>