

German transport minister promises to get to the bottom of dieselgate

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News

German transport minister Alexander Dobrindt has warned that “further measures” will be taken to ensure there is no repeat of the VW emissions scandal.



VW logo | Photo credit: Press Association

Speaking in a debate in Parliament on Thursday, the minister said the German authorities were “determined to get to the bottom” of the affair that has rocked the German car making giant.

Dobrindt said, “You do have to wonder how it was that a company was able to break the rules like this. It suggests that the rules were not adequate in the first place.”

He added, “VW has cheated and committed a technical fraud. Testing has improved, but we have got

to ensure that it is harder to cheat.”

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The federal minister was addressing the committee of inquiry into emission measurements in the automotive sector (EMIS), the parliamentary body that is currently considering the EU response to the Volkswagen emissions scandal.

While rules on car safety and environmental standards are agreed at EU level, implementation of car certification, called type approval, is done at national level.

The Volkswagen scandal was revealed following a study into differences between emissions from diesel vehicles in the US and Europe. It first came to light in the US where, on Friday, it emerged that nearly 500,000 VW owners are close to being able to sell their vehicles back to VW.

Drivers have been waiting more than a year to be compensated following the emissions scandal.

In his appearance before the committee, Dobrindt briefly outlined the steps taken by German authorities after the emissions scandal broke in September 2015, saying that the ministry of transport established an investigative committee which re-checked whether Volkswagen and other diesel models complied with pollution limits.

The ministry, he told the packed hearing, ordered a recall of more than 2.4 million VW cars to have revised engine software retrofitted, while an additional 630,000 vehicles from other manufacturers which were “optimised” for type approval tests will eventually also have their emission control systems overhauled.

He said, “There is no way this involves just one member state (Germany) but the whole of Europe. I want to assure this committee that we took immediate action when this brought to our attention in September 2015.”

He said this included giving VW a “binding timetable to get rid of” the so-called “defeat devices” fitted to thousands of its vehicles.

“Further measures will be taken until we have all the necessary evidence that everything that should be done to deal with this has been done,” he said.

Asked by committee members whether the EU legislation is too vague about “defeat devices”, he explained that it should be clearer regarding possible exceptions (such as switching off), and allow them specifically only in very rare cases where the manufacturer can prove there is no other technology available to protect the engine.

Dobrindt - the first national government minister to appear before the special committee - also rejected the possibility of a class action by consumers to demand compensation from VW because, he said, there is “no legal basis for it.”

Even so, he agreed that type approval emission tests should be made more realistic and checks on cars already on the road should be stricter, including random “doping” tests to prevent manufacturers from making cars that pollute within the limits only in laboratories.

He said, “I am confident that things will improve of all the measures we have taken in Germany and the authorities in other member states.”

He added that he “welcomed” the inquiry set up by Parliament but, said that “it must be given the competence to deal with non-compliance.”

Questioned by some MEPs about the efficiency and potential environmental harm posed by diesel vehicles, he said, “Diesel technology, in the past, was seen as being an advantage in lowering CO2 emissions.”

Olaf Lies, Lower Saxony’s state minister for the economy, labour and transport, also appeared before the committee and explained VW’s importance as the biggest employer and strategic partner in the region, where it has its headquarters.

The Lower Saxony region is also VW’s second biggest shareholder Lies is a member of the company’s supervisory board.

Neither the board nor the regional authorities had any prior knowledge of cheating in emission tests on diesel engines, he said.

Since September 2015 a “thorough” investigation has been under way, the results of which should be published by the end of this year, he added.

Lies had to explain in detail the role of supervisory board, which he said cannot take day-to-day decisions on how the VW is managed but does have a say in long-term strategic discussions, such as the move to electric mobility, which will also result in fewer jobs.

About the author

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