Crappy Tesla cars are 'Nearly unusable': Calif. police majorly push back on Tesla cop cars

Are Teslas “the patrol cars of the future”? Northern California police say no.Image via Menlo Park Police; Illustration by SFGATE

By Matt LaFever,

In September 2020, Gov. Gavin Newsom used the power of the pen to mandate that by 2035, all vehicles sold in California be zero-emission. It’s been four years and a mixed bag. Electric vehicle sales are declining, the number of chargers is growing but still woefully low, and there are growing concerns the state’s power grid won’t keep up with future demand.

Despite these bumps in the road, many municipalities and organizations throughout the state are leading by example. Los Angeles committed to transitioning its 10,000-vehicle fleet to electric. The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency has begun replacing aging gasoline buses with electric ones. In August, multiple major media outlets fawned over the South Pasadena Police Department’s adoption of an all-Tesla police fleet, the first all-electric police force in the country.

Given Tesla’s dominance in the EV market, powered primarily by the wide availability of the Supercharger network, it makes sense that the California-born company would be the natural choice for fleets looking to electrify. The cars are still primarily built in the company’s Bay Area factory, which might suggest in-state supply would be robust and easy to access. Yet for one heavy-driving government group, the push to EVs is actually putting it at odds with the carmaker.

One of the electric buses from Proterra at the Muni bus yard on Indiana Street in San Francisco on Dec. 15, 2022.

Douglas Zimmerman/SFGATE

SFGATE spoke with three police chiefs from Northern California cities who have independently come to the same conclusion: Teslas are not equipped to handle the demands of modern policing. Studies have shown the U.S. transportation sector contributes 29% of the country’s overall greenhouse gas emissions. If law enforcement can’t rely on the most commercially available EVs in this push toward a greener future, it casts doubt on how realistic Newsom’s push really is.

SFGATE reached out to Tesla media representatives multiple times in the course of reporting this story but did not receive any response.

Too small, too risky

Ukiah Police Department Chief Cedric Crook manages the largest municipal police force in Mendocino County (Ukiah is the county seat). Crook’s beat is a town of 16,000 that abuts mountains, streams, Native reservations and Highway 101, which brings travelers to and from the Emerald Triangle.

In 2022, the Ukiah City Council passed a climate resolution directing the city to replace "city fleet vehicles, light-and-heavy-duty trucks, and other mobile equipment, where feasible, with models that run fully on electricity or green hydrogen."

Ukiah police Chief Cedric Crook is incorporating two Teslas into his department's fleet but told SFGATE, "I'm not ready to put an officer in a Tesla." Instead, the vehicles will be used for administrative duties rather than patrol.

Staff photo from the city of Ukiah

On Aug. 7, 2024, Crook took his first step toward all-electric, requesting the City Council approve the purchase of two Tesla Model 3s, which is the company's sedan offering. Between the purchase price of the vehicles and the $35,000 in modifications for them to be patrol-ready, the purchase totaled nearly $150,000, which the council approved.

No car manufacturers produce vehicles that are already ready for patrol, and transforming a commercially sold Tesla into a crime-fighting machine is no small feat. Beyond the standard emergency lights, sirens, radio, antenna, push bar, partition and gun rack that are added to the car, the vehicle gets a serious upgrade with ballistic panels to toughen it up for the streets, according to a report prepared by a different California city that investigated adopting Teslas for police use.

Modification companies that work with cops know legacy brands like Ford, Chevrolet and Dodge well because the cars have a long-standing history of being used by police. They know each car manufacturer's platforms and idiosyncrasies and have developed modification kits to outfit a standard cop car.

Tesla is an unknown entity to these folks. There is only one modification shop for Tesla cop cars: Unplugged Performance in Hawthorne, about 500 miles south of Crook's department headquarters in Ukiah. After Crook got the green light from the City Council to buy the Teslas and pay for the Unplugged Performance modifications, he reached out to the SoCal shop for its turn-around time. Unplugged Performance said it would take months.

Crook is now playing out the realities of purchasing two non-modified Teslas. He described the purchase as a direct result of the "big push from the city's Climate Initiative" to adopt EVs. Two Tesla Supercharger stations have been installed in Ukiah in the past two years, but Crook said the city has not clarified how he would be charging the EVs. Would his patrol officers be expected to charge them at the public stations, or might the city foot the bill for Superchargers to be installed in the department parking lot?

Tesla vehicles recharge at the Tesla Supercharger station near Harris Ranch in Coalinga, Calif., on April 17, 2023.

The car has other issues, namely size. Tesla back seats "only have room for one prisoner," Crook said, limiting an officer's ability to sequester suspects. With an all-Tesla police force, Crook believes incidents involving more than one party will require more officers to respond with more cars, putting strain on resources, all because of the tiny back seat.

Police are often required to transport suspects, witnesses or victims for cases they're working, sometimes for long distances. Crook remembered a case where his detectives drove 630 miles to Mexico to transport a potentially dangerous subject in their vehicle. If the detectives were in a Tesla, Crook noted they would have had to spend an hour in the middle of the drive at an unsecured public charging station standing guard over the person, something that would not happen with an internal combustion engine.

Furthermore, Crook told SFGATE that he'd heard officers were unable to comfortably get in and out of the driver's seat with their duty belt on because of the Tesla's design. Police duty belts generally weigh between 20 and 25 pounds, adding bulk to an officer's torso, which may not fit within the slim, streamlined Tesla aesthetic.

Kuka robots work on Tesla Model X in the Tesla factory in Fremont, Calif., on Thursday, July 26, 2018.

Mason Trinca/The Washington Post/Getty Images

Another concern Crook has about Teslas, and EVs broadly, comes from an essential lesson he was taught in the police academy: "In a firefight, hide behind the engine block." In a Tesla, there is no engine block, leaving officers without their preferred cover, he said.

For all of these reasons, and in an effort to still comply with the go-green mandate, Crook decided to buy the Model 3s — but for his administrative staff. Crook said he originally tried to order EVs from other manufacturers but was met with supply chain issues and shipping delays. Teslas could be delivered to Ukiah within a month, so he made the call. Now, the two black Tesla 3s will not be used for patrol purposes but as transport for command staff, Crook told SFGATE, and they won't even be ready for at least six months due to the modifications required.

Bottom line? "I'm not ready to put an officer in a Tesla," Crook said.

Not even in Silicon Valley

Chief David Norris is the top cop of the Menlo Park Police Department, the law enforcement agency tasked with patrolling the city next door to Tesla's engineering headquarters in Palo Alto. It's a 6-mile drive from Menlo Park's Police Department to Tesla's HQ, with all the money, liberal politics and tech influence one would expect from Silicon Valley.

But just like his colleague in rural Mendocino County, Norris has decided Teslas are not ready for police work.

Like the city of Ukiah, the city of Menlo Park approved a resolution calling for the adoption of zero-emission fleet vehicles and equipment in 2019. Norris took up the task and agreed to see how Teslas worked for patrol. He ordered three long-range Model Y's, which are slightly larger than Crook's Model 3s, got them outfitted for patrol duties and went about conducting a systematized pilot study of the cars' performance.

The study offered that Menlo Park officers "appreciated the acceleration, steering and vehicle speed compared to the hybrids and remaining gasoline-only patrol vehicles." However, "the Tesla presented

challenges due to the small interior space, ‘smart car’ features, and low vehicle profile limiting maneuverability (e.g., jumping curbs, off-road use).”

Two of the Menlo Park Police Department’s Tesla Model Y’s. After an extensive pilot study and analysis, Chief David Norris concluded Tesla vehicles are not “the patrol cars of the future.”

Contributed by Menlo Park police Chief David Norris

The modifications necessary for police work exacerbated space constraints, the report said. The partition separating the front and back seats reduced the available space up front, where the center console, light controls and communications tablet are housed. As a result, officers in full patrol gear had limited room in the front seat. Officers reported the cramped cabin caused their duty belts and bulletproof vests to jut into the passenger seat, “making it nearly unusable.”

Furthermore, officers reported “autopilot interference,” which caused “a delay when officers shift into drive” and also triggered an automatic stop when officers tried to pull over to the side of the road, possibly because the car assumed the vehicle was wrongfully veering off course. The lighting controls on Tesla’s touch screen required an onerous multistep process to dim lights at night, and proximity locking, sleep mode and self-closing doors caused issues with officers being able to keep their vehicles locked when desired.

Based on the pilot study’s findings, Norris wrote that Tesla Y’s, in their current configuration, do not appear to be the “patrol cars of the future,” though he wrote that he remained committed to Menlo Park’s EV fleet goal.

Norris told SFGATE he walked away from the study knowing the importance of working with electric vehicle manufacturers that have a history of working with patrol vehicles. “We don’t want to buy things off the retail market and turn them into a police car,” he said. He also echoed Crook’s concerns about charging stations, which he said are treated as an afterthought: “The shiny thing is the car; you have to have the charging infrastructure.”

The right EV for the job

Fort Bragg is the population center of Mendocino County’s coast. The town is relatively isolated, at least one hour from Highway 101. Its residents are salt-tinged, an active fishing fleet is in the harbor, and the Pacific’s brutal winter storms don’t really phase folks.

Fort Bragg Police Department Chief Neil Cervenka’s efforts to electrify his fleet were not at the direction of elected officials. Cervenka decided himself to go electric, writing in an article for Police1 magazine, “My desire to transition to EV police vehicles aligned with my new community.”

An example of Fort Bragg Police Department’s Ford F-150 Lightning fleet, which Chief Neil Cervenka has proved to be a vehicle capable of meeting the demands of modern law enforcement. He said, “Tesla isn’t the right answer in the law enforcement market currently for electric adoption.”

Contributed by Fort Bragg police Chief Neil Cervenka

When SFGATE spoke with Cervenka, the depth of his EV knowledge was on full display. He is so passionate about the switch that his department had chargers installed in the parking lot before any electric vehicles were even ordered. The chief had a specific vehicle in mind: the Ford F-150 Lightning, the all-electric version of the classic F-150 truck that has long been used by law enforcement. Since 2022, the Fort Bragg Police Department has acquired five electric trucks through incentive programs, rebates and grants, reducing costs to the point where switching to EVs was cheaper than replacing decommissioned police cars with gasoline vehicles. Five of the department's nine vehicles are electric; Cervenka said they'll be fully electric within two years.

Ford F-150 trucks are the "most popular selling trucks in America," Cervenka said. That means parts are readily available, as are mechanics who can maintain the vehicle, even for the Lightning version. In contrast, Cervenka said Teslas are "tricky" and usually specifically require "a Tesla technician to do a lot of the work. And they're out of service for quite some time."

Furthermore, companies have spent decades modifying F-150s for police. Outfitting them for patrol is less expensive because there are more vendors to choose from, and there are also more options. Cervenka noted Crook's challenge as one reason he avoided Teslas: "I would have to transport our vehicles to Southern California, have them outfitted and then get them transported back," which would be "cost-prohibitive."

The design of the Ford F-150 is also much more conducive to police work, Cervenka said. Its high clearance and four-wheel drive make it comfortable on Mendocino County's streets and back roads. The bed of the vehicle has room for utility drawers to store policing equipment, and the frunk provides a space for officers' personal belongings. The bed also solves a very niche yet persistent problem in policing, Cervenka said: transporting bikes and shopping carts. Instead of mounting those items on a crash bar, cops can just throw them in the back of the truck.

In Cervenka's eyes, the fact that Teslas aren't well-equipped for police work doesn't mean cops should just give up on going green altogether. "Tesla isn't the right answer in the law enforcement market currently for electric adoption," he said, "but there might be better options."