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25C

Pocket bikes fun, cheap, but not street-legal



Frank Cortez, who manages Xpresscycles.com in Torrance, sells pocket bikes, foreground, and other cycles. Cortez says he feels the small cycles have been unfairly declared illegal on city streets. Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

Transportation: CHP, DMV warn cycles' drivers they face fines, impounds.

By Kristopher Hanson
Staff writer

They're inexpensive, fun and wildly popular.

They're also illegal, and people caught riding pocket bikes on public streets now face the possibility that police will fine

them and impound their miniature motor-cycles for up to 30 days.

In the past year, as an influx of the tiny motorbikes flooded retailers — and streets across California — law enforcement officials have been scrambling to define where the pint-size racers fall within the law.

The DMV earlier this month categorized pocket bikes as motor-driven cycles, which are defined as having engines smaller than 150 cubic centimeters, or 150 cc. This places pocket bikes in a different

category than motorized scooters and motorized bicycles, which a 1999 state law says are legal for use on most public streets.

Most motor-driven cycles are street legal as well, but because pocket bikes don't have Vehicle Identification Numbers and Department of Transportation-approved turn signals, brake lights and other required equipment, they can't be registered for use on city streets.

PLEASE SEE BIKES / A11

BIKES AND SCOOTERS: WHAT'S LEGAL?

Mini-motorcycle ("Pocket bike")



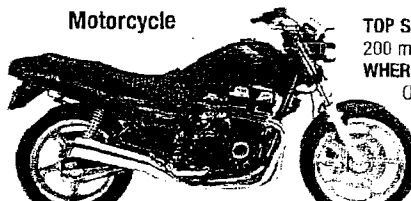
SIZE: 24-32 inches tall
TOP SPEED: 15-50 mph
WHERE IT'S LEGAL: Off-road use only

Motorized scooter



SIZE: About 48 inches
TOP SPEED: 20-25 mph
WHERE IT'S LEGAL: Bike lanes, ages 16

Motorcycle



TOP SPEED: up to 200 mph
WHERE IT'S LEGAL: On-road, licensed drivers

BIKES: Low profile is a problem

CONTINUED FROM A1

California Highway Patrol officials have also deemed the bikes too dangerous for use on public roadways because of their low stature, which makes them difficult for other motorists to see.

"It basically comes down to the visibility and equipment issue and the lack of a VIN," said DMV spokesman Armando Botello. "Without the (VIN), we're powerless to track and register them."

So even if a driver has a valid motorcycle license, is wearing a helmet and riding on a quiet side street, he or she still faces the possibility of a fine and 30-day impound.

"We have people calling us, telling us they bought one for their child to ride to school and now it's been impounded," said California Highway Patrol spokesman Ron Burch. "Most people aren't even aware of the laws."

"Our position is that we would rather educate the public as to what these vehicles were intended for rather than issue citations and impound bikes."

The latest version of the mini-bike, first popularized in the 1960s, appeared on the U.S. market a few years ago and quickly grew in popularity as an inexpensive way to get around campgrounds, race tracks and large, open parking lots, among other places.

Their presence soon spread to neighborhoods across the Southland, where they became especially popular with kids too young to get driver's licenses.

"A lot of times, they're being marketed to kids that are around 8 or 10 years old who have little or no training on traffic laws and safety and who are more likely to be involved in a collision," Burch said.

Most of the bikes are manufactured in China and feature tiny but powerful gasoline engines capable of racing in excess of 40 mph.

They can be found retailing at swap meets and toy and discount stores for between \$250 and \$2,000, depending on the model, size and options desired.

Most retailers warn buyers of the restrictions barring them from public roads, and some have started slapping stickers on the bike's

Road Use Only."

"I tell them that they have to keep these bikes on private property where no one will be bothered by the noise or traffic," said Frank Cortez, who manages Xpresscycles.com, a Torrance-based retailer of on- and off-road motorcycles and mopeds.

While pocket bikes are banned from public streets, motorized scooters and motorized bicycles are legal in most circumstances and do not require a driver's license, registration or insurance.

A 1999 law placed limited restrictions on the scooters and motorized bicycles, allowing riders age 16 and older to take them on city streets with speed limits under 25 mph.

On streets with higher speed limits, riders must stay in the bike lanes or as far to the right shoulder as possible.

The difference between pocket bikes and scooters, police say, is that scooters allow their riders to sit upright, giving them a better view of the roadway and allowing other motorists to see them.

Motorized bikes and scooters can also be powered by their riders as well as their motors and most are limited in their top speed, typically maxing out at 15 to 20 mph.

"The big difference with pocket bikes and motorized scooters is the pocket bikes are so much faster and are so much closer to the ground," said Long Beach Police Sgt. Hans Kohnlein. "With the scooters, at least you can see them because they're standing up or sitting on a seat that's up pretty high. The others are just too close to the ground for safe use."

Still, pocket bike retailers and riders feel they're being singled out.

"I think it's a big contradiction that they're allowing the other little bikes and scooters to be on the street, but not the pocket bikes," Cortez said. "I guess it's because the pocket bikes are so fast and the kids tend to be more reckless on them. Still, I wouldn't see a problem if they just kept them in bike lanes."

To cope with the scooter and pocket-bike craze sweeping the state, lawmakers have proposed a number of new laws to regulate them, though none has yet become law.

One piece of legislation, Assem-

blywoman Wilma Chan, D-Oakland, and co-authored by Assemblywoman Jenny Oropesa, D-Long Beach, would require motorized scooter and motorized bicycle riders to hold a valid Class C driver's license.

If passed, the new law would not go into effect until Jan. 1, 2005, at the earliest. It's currently under consideration by the state Senate.

In the meantime, law enforce-

ment officials advise pocket bike owners to keep their bikes on private property and off city streets.

"The bottom line is, pocket bikes are not legal to ride on the street — any street," said CHP Assistant Chief Art Acevedo.

For information on laws regulating pocket bikes, motorized scooters, etc. and age and licensing requirements, visit www.chp.ca.gov/html/motors.html.

EDITORIAL

Press-Telegram

604 Pine Avenue Long Beach, CA 90844 (562) 435-1161
www.presselegram.com
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The pocket bike menace

They're not street legal —
and they're very dangerous.

When we started spotting those miniature motorcycles, or "pocket bikes," around town a few months back, our first thought was: Death traps. Second thought: Kids and teenagers are going to go crazy for these things.

Not exactly a recipe for success.

The phrase "accident waiting to happen" has never been more applicable than to pocket bikes on city streets. They've been deemed illegal for use on public streets, but according to the California Highway Patrol, many people don't know that. They're selling like hotcakes, and parents have even bought them for their kids to ride to school.

Pocket bikes aren't like motorized scooters, though, which are legal for use in bike lanes if riders are at least 16 years old. Scooters are as

tall as a bicycle and generally can't go much faster than 25 miles an hour. Pocket bikes, on the other hand, are a mere two- to three-feet tall, invisible to car drivers in almost all directions, and can zoom along at speeds of up to 50 miles an hour. They don't have the proper turn signals and lights, either.

They're also relatively cheap, starting at just \$250 each. The enticing prices have led to a flood of pocket bikes from China to the U.S. marketplace.

Legislation aimed at pocket bikes is being proposed in Sacramento, but since the DMV has already declared them illegal, additional laws aren't needed. The trend will subside after law enforcement officers start handing out stacks of costly tickets, and word spreads that riding pocket bikes around town is a costly gamble. If common sense and self-preservation instincts aren't enough to keep pocket bikes off city streets, then tickets — and lots of them — ought to do the trick.

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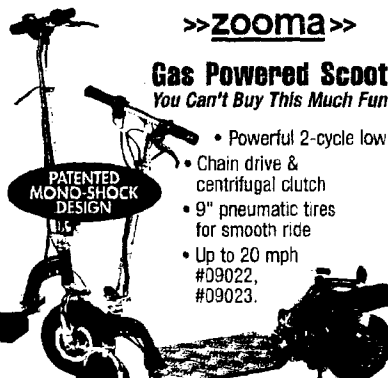
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