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Driverless car rules show how to set, narrow and widen limits on automation.

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IN BRIEF

Regulators in California, Canada and the United Kingdom set or propose written limits on where, when and how driverless vehicles may operate.

California’s DMV can narrow those limits without suspending a permit, and requires its approval before they are widened.

We recommend the same three things for your automations: written limits, a way to narrow them at once and evidence before widening.

Regulators that allow driverless vehicles on public roads have had to decide how far each vehicle may go on its own. Their answer is a written set of operating limits, which in California can be narrowed quickly and widened only with approval. We read those rules as a practical model for an organization setting limits on its own automations.

How regulators define the limits

The California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) adopted new deployment rules on 28 April 2026. They require each manufacturer to identify the vehicle's "operational design domain", meaning the conditions it is designed to drive in. The manufacturer must certify that its vehicles are "designed to be incapable of operating in the autonomous mode outside" those conditions.

The rules also require a list of the conditions that restrict the vehicle. They include bad weather, traffic, road characteristics and limits by location or road type. The manufacturer must also describe how the vehicle is designed to react once it finds itself outside its limits.

The DMV publishes the approved limits for each permit holder: the places, times, weather and speeds in which its vehicles may drive. One deployment permit on that page lists "Daytime" operation. It excludes "Flooded highways, heavy smoke, heavy dust, and heavy fog, snowstorms".

How California narrows and widens them

The DMV's release of 28 April 2026 says the new rules let it "impose targeted operational restrictions on AV manufacturers". It lists "fleet size, location, speed and weather limits" among those restrictions. Local emergency officials can also direct the vehicles out of active emergency zones.

The adopted rules describe these restrictions as measures for cases where "the circumstances do not require a full suspension or revocation". They can reduce the fleet, area, road types, weather conditions or hours of operation. They can also require a person in the vehicle.

An immediate restriction is allowed where the DMV finds that testing or deployment poses an imminent hazard. The DMV lifts a restriction once it is satisfied, from data the manufacturer submits, that the deficiencies behind it "have been addressed".

Before a manufacturer widens its limits, the adopted rules require an updated safety case and DMV approval of an amended application. That covers a new road type, new areas, new days or hours and the removal of a restricted condition. The Order to Adopt also covers any rise in maximum speed of "more than 15 miles per hour above that on the approved permit".

Limits in Canada and the United Kingdom

Transport Canada's safety framework describes motor vehicle safety in Canada as "a shared responsibility among federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments, industry partners, and road users."

Transport Canada's testing guidelines, last modified on 6 August 2021, say provinces and territories "remain responsible for approving requests from trial organizations". The guidelines advise that each test vehicle have clearly defined operating limits and a route chosen to suit them.

The guidelines also suggest limiting an automated shuttle's hours at first "to off-peak times". Any collision or incident that needs an emergency response should be reported.

Quebec's government says an applicant must obtain an authorization before testing an automated vehicle. The testing must take place within a government pilot project. The application must describe the territory, the planned route and the measures proposed for the safety of other vehicles and road users.

In the United Kingdom, the Department for Transport consulted on draft safety principles from 17 June to 9 September 2026. One draft principle says vehicles should "only operate autonomously within the limits under which they are specifically designed to function." The draft statement says the Secretary of State must monitor and assess the general performance of authorized vehicles and publish a report each year.

Recalls and the operator's own limits

Waymo filed a safety recall report with the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) on 17 June 2026. The recall report covers 3,871 units of Waymo's fifth-generation automated driving system, those capable of driverless freeway operation. Under certain circumstances, the vehicles "may enter and drive at speed in freeway construction zones".

Waymo's own account in the filing records that it restricted its own freeway driving twice before deciding on a recall. The recall filing dates the events behind those restrictions to April and May 2026, and the recall decision to 8 June 2026. The remedy it names is software improvements and "additional operational protocols".

On 6 November 2026, NHTSA opened a recall query into an earlier Waymo software remedy for vehicles passing stopped school buses. NHTSA's notice says most incidents identified in its earlier evaluation came after 17 November 2025, the date by which Waymo's recall report said the remedy was complete. NHTSA says the query will "assess the adequacy of the remedy" and identify the causes of the conditions behind the later reports.

We see the recall as an operator narrowing its own limits while it looked for a cause. The query, in our view, is a regulator checking whether a fix worked after it was made.

What this means for you

We think an organization adopting automation should settle three things, drawn from these rules, before any automation goes live. They apply equally to a workflow that routes invoices and to an AI agent that answers customers.

- **Write down the operating limits.** Name the systems, data, hours, amounts and decisions each automation may touch, and what it does when a case falls outside them.
- **Keep a way to narrow them at once.** Name who may reduce an automation's scope, to fewer cases or to human approval, without switching it off.
- **Ask for evidence before widening them.** Treat a new task, system or threshold as a change that needs results from the current limits and a named approver.

Revisit all three after any incident. After each fix, confirm the cause has gone before you restore the full scope.

Setting these limits for the automations you run or plan is part of our advanced automations and AI agents service. Deciding which tasks to automate first belongs to technology strategy. You can request a briefing on either.

SOURCES

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