

California defines a salvaged vehicle as one that has been either totally destroyed or damaged beyond what the insurance company is willing to pay to fix it, so the owner never gets the vehicle repaired. Depending on its condition, one of several things may happen to the car.

The first of these is that the title is exchanged for a Salvage Certificate issued by the California Department of Motor Vehicles. This becomes the new ownership document; in other words, a salvage vehicle in California has no title.

Salvaged vehicles are often sold to wrecking yards for scraps and parts. Even cars that have been in bad accidents often have some working components that other people need for their own projects.

Resurrecting a Salvage Vehicle

Sometimes, a salvage vehicle can be driven again. Even if an insurer says a car is totaled, it might actually be fixable.

Used car dealers purchase totaled vehicles at auction, repair them, and then resell them to the public. When a salvaged vehicle is repaired to street-worthiness, the Salvage Certificate is exchanged for a special title so it can be legally sold. This title says "Revived Salvage." It will never get a clean title again. At this point, the vehicle may be reregistered.

How to Spot a Salvage

In the private market, the easiest way to spot a salvage is to look at the title. It will either say "Revived Salvage" or have a Salvage Certificate instead of a title. By taking away the title, California is protecting consumers against buying a salvage vehicle without knowing it.

"Junked" Vehicles

Junked vehicles are basically a pile of parts.

Believe it or not, junked vehicles may also be revived and sold as operational, and they will also carry a brand on the title. More likely, they will be further dismantled and the usable parts resold.

Reregistering a Junked Vehicle

As with a Revived Salvage car, it's possible to put a junked vehicle back into service and reregister it. If you've rebuilt a junked vehicle, the DMV has put together a short checklist of what you need.

The DMV wants to see the car's history, in the form of all sales slips, bills of sale, and receipts for everything you got relating to the car. Make sure that each of these details what was included in the sale: the part, year, make, model, and vehicle identification number.

On the Road Again

There are a few more hurdles before you can legally drive your rebuilt car.

Vehicle Inspections

Whether your reclaimed vehicle was salvaged or junked, it will require inspections before you can legally drive it. The first inspection verifies that all the parts and components in the car were legally bought.

This inspection may be done at your local DMV office by appointment or at the closest California Highway Patrol station, also by appointment.

Besides this once-over, you'll also need to get a Brake and Lights Inspection certificate. Check the phone book for a service station or repair shop in your area that is certified to do these inspections.

Note: If the vehicle was originally equipped with airbags, it will need to have airbags reinstalled.

No Record of Title

If a vehicle's been out of registration with the California DMV for four years or more, it might no longer be in the agency's

database. Even if you have all the paperwork, including a paper title or salvage certificate, the vehicle's record will need to be reactivated.

Using Junked or Salvaged Parts

If you buy car parts or the whole car to use for your custom ride, keep all of the paperwork involved with the vehicle. You'll need to show it when you register your custom car.