

Sacramento Bee (California)

March 19, 2010 Friday
METRO FINAL EDITION

State's green future depends on AB 32

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SECTION: EDITORIALS; Pg. A13

LENGTH: 834 words

During a cross-country meet in Monrovia during the 1970s, I watched the runner ahead of me disappear into a curtain of smoggy haze. At the finish line runners would gasp, collapse and puke, so severe was California's air pollution.

Fast forward four decades to today's dramatically improved air quality in all the state's major metropolitan areas. Emissions in the Los Angeles area have been slashed about 90 percent, Californians drive cars that emit one-tenth the exhaust they once did and the state leads the nation in low levels of per capita energy use.

Of all the things broken in California today, the campaign for clean air is not one of them.

But an initiative proposed for the November ballot would suspend a key element of California's clean-air program. It targets the California Global Warming Solution Act, or AB 32, which requires greenhouse gas emissions reductions to 1990 levels by 2020.

The initiative is a response to recession fatigue and fear that pollution curbs could drive out jobs and harm the economy. But it is the wrong path for California.

To be sure, the economy is in handle-with-care mode, yet it's difficult to say exactly how a law will affect economic growth years into the future.

The state Air Resources Board says AB 32 will add green jobs in the long term, the Legislative Analyst's Office says it will cost some jobs in the near term. Energy prices will likely rise as California adds renewable power, but costs can be offset by efficiency measures.

The ballot measure -- called the California Jobs Initiative -- is a cynical bit of doublespeak as it's sponsored by Texas-based oil firms Valero Energy Co. and Tesoro Corp. -- two of the state's biggest carbon emitters -- and conservative politicians who see economic distress as opportunity to roll back environmental protections. It would require California to abandon greenhouse gas controls, including renewable energy and clean-fuel rules, until the state unemployment rate falls to less than half today's rate of 12.5 percent.

The proposal is a step backward at a time when California needs to surge forward to new energy solutions. It marks a radical departure from how California has controlled air pollution for more than a half century, because this will be the first time voters have been asked to repeal a cornerstone of California's clean-air program. A win at the ballot box would telegraph to the world that the state no longer has the political will to press the fight against global warming at a moment when leadership in Washington, D.C., and at the United Nations is slipping.

California's success against emissions is the result of technical experts who functioned independent of political influence to successfully resist powerful Detroit automakers and oil companies when the federal government or other states could not.

Cherry-picking clean-air laws at the ballot box is not likely to perpetuate success because air pollution control is a mosh pit of arcane specialties, including engineering, epidemiology, chemistry, law, physics, toxicology and economics -- arguably the most complex undertaking in government.

Furthermore, California's core strategy relies on "technology-forcing measures" that push the limits of know-how beyond what's comfortable to drive cutting-edge solutions that clobber emissions. The strategy produced game-changing

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remedies such as catalytic converters, unleaded gasoline, hybrid-electric cars and reformulated consumer products. The state's climate-protection law will open a new front in the campaign for clean air, pressing transformative technologies that not only clean up smokestacks and tailpipes, but force the state's economy to de-carbonize. Time and again, California's clean-air regulations have opened new markets, which attracted investment that led to technological innovation, new jobs and improved efficiencies.

But the new ballot initiative would stop that momentum cold because it would suspend AB 32 until unemployment in California holds at 5.5 percent or lower for four quarters -- a level achieved only twice in the past 24 years. Without a stable regulatory climate, businesses will be unwilling to invest in clean, new technologies, choking needed innovation and capital at the moment when California is poised to leap toward a sustainable society.

Over the years, California beat air pollution because we stayed the course, despite boom or bust cycles, war or peace, or whether Democrats or Republicans were in power. It wasn't always easy or cheap, but our skies are bluer, people's health is better, and growth propelled California into the eighth-largest economy in the world.

If we don't hold fast now, innovation will pass us by as other countries capitalize on advanced energy technologies and green jobs to grow their economies. California needs AB 32 to retain its edge and ensure we don't become the rust belt of the 21st century.

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LOAD-DATE: March 20, 2010

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

NOTES: VIEWPOINTS

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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