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California's Bold Plan to Protect the Planet

A Republican encourages the governor to sign global warming bills that could revolutionize how the world addresses climate change.

By Curtis Moore

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AS TEMPERATURES and sea levels have risen, glaciers receded and snowpacks melted, the governments of the world have dithered over how to save the planet from global warming. Last week, California showed them.

I started studying the economics and science of climate change in 1984 as the Republican counsel for the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. I believe the legislation that California representatives sent to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Friday not only leapfrogs the Kyoto Protocol (the international global warming agreement that former Vice President Al Gore praises and President Bush vilifies) but establishes a framework for revolutionizing the way the world contends with air pollution and its threats.

With AB 32, California has become the first government I know of to attack greenhouse emissions without mandating a carbon "cap-and-trade" system. "Cap and trade" sets a standard for emissions, but it also allows companies to trade in the right to pollute up to that standard. That means companies that cut emissions can sell "emission rights" to other companies that don't want to invest in cleaner technology. It doesn't eliminate pollution as much as create a market in it. Despite immense pressure from businesses and outspoken support of trading by some environmental groups, the Legislature has allowed carbon cap-and-trade but refused to mandate it.

The Los Angeles Times editorialized that cap-and-trade "worked well in the context of the Clean Air Act." Not so. The measure of success should be whether health and environmental objectives are met. The purpose of Clean Air Act trading was to restore life to lakes and streams, especially in the Northeast, that had been acidified by pollution from coal-fired power plants. But 16 years later, lakes and soils in the Northeast are still acidic and probably will remain so for another half a century.

Refusing to mandate cap-and-trade opens the door to new market mechanisms for reducing pollution. Sweden's "feebates," for example, tax relatively dirty polluters or their products, then rebate all the money to relatively clean polluters. The feebate used against smog-forming oxides of nitrogen caused emissions to drop 40% within 12 months in Sweden.

Another such mechanism is Japan's requirement that polluters pay lost income, medical bills and burial costs to nearly 100,000 victims of air pollution, which has resulted in the world's cleanest power plants and refineries.

In addition to its stance on cap-and-trade, AB 32 also improves on other global warming initiatives by applying curbs not just to carbon dioxide but to "contributory" pollutants such as black carbon, or soot, and ozone, or smog.

HEADLINES HAVE focused on the law's requirement that CO₂ emissions come down to 1990 levels by 2020. That's important, because CO₂, which is created by burning coal, oil and gas, will cause most future temperature increases. But the atmospheric lifetime of CO₂ is 3,000 years, so reducing it provides long-term, not near-term, cooling benefits.

Contributory pollutants, on the other hand, also cause global warming, but their atmospheric lifetimes range from a few minutes to 12 years. California has long controlled these substances for reasons of public health, but now it must do more. The result: cooling will start sooner and, because smog and soot are killers — about 8,000 Californians die each year because of them — more lives will be saved.

And the good news continues. Besides AB 32, California legislators have sent five other environmental bills to the governor to sign this month. One requires that electricity production create no more pollution than that associated with one of the most advanced generating technologies. Two others boost Schwarzenegger's "million solar roofs" plan and fuel cells — which, when using hydrogen, produce only pure water and electricity, with zero pollution. Yet another law would impose a \$30 fee for each container at the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles — possibly the largest aggregate source of global warming pollution west of the Mississippi — to help pay for cleansing the air. And finally, the Legislature also passed a bill requiring that by 2020, at least 50% of new passenger cars and light-duty trucks be clean, alternative-fuel vehicles, such as hydrogen, plug-in hybrids and flex-fuel vehicles.

It's not certain that the governor will sign all of these initiatives into law, but it would be a shame if he didn't. Taken together, they represent the most comprehensive and rigorous attack on air pollution adopted in a generation, one that is certain to be adopted throughout the world — and one that just might save it.