

Obama likely to clear path for California emissions law

January 23 2009, By Rob Hotakainen, McClatchy Newspapers

With a new occupant in the White House, California could soon start enforcing its 2002 law that requires a sharp reduction in vehicle emissions.

State leaders and environmentalists are pressing for quick approval of a waiver that would let California and at least 13 other states impose tougher air-quality standards than are allowed under federal law. The Bush administration rejected the request a year ago, but that could be reversed by President Barack Obama and his environmental team.

During the presidential campaign, Obama said that he backed the California law. Last year in the Senate, he co-sponsored a bill by Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer of California to approve the waiver.

"If I'm confirmed, I will immediately revisit the waiver," Lisa Jackson, Obama's choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency, told Boxer at her confirmation hearing last week.

Boxer, the head of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, is expecting quick approval. She compared the EPA under Bush's leadership to Sleeping Beauty, saying the agency now "needs to be awakened from a deep and nightmarish sleep."

If the EPA grants the waiver, California and the other states will begin a program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from passenger vehicles by 30 percent over the next seven years, according to Mary Nichols, chair

of California's Air Resources Board.

Nichols and Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger sent letters to the new administration on Wednesday, asking for permission to enforce the law. The governor said the decision to reject the waiver was "fundamentally flawed."

Critics said that granting the waiver would further hurt the economy.

Republican Rep. Tom McClintock of California said the governor "is asking the president to waive a federal law that currently protects California consumers from the governor's crusade to save the planet by destroying California's economy."

Auto manufacturers have long opposed the California law, which would require them to produce more fuel-efficient vehicles. The Bush administration sided with them, saying that only the federal government can set fuel-efficiency standards.

Carmakers also contend that the law could increase manufacturing costs, which then would be passed along to consumers. Environmentalists counter by saying consumers would save money in the long run because higher purchase costs would be offset by lower fuel costs.

The Association of International Automobile Manufacturers, a trade group that represents Honda, Toyota and 12 other international manufacturers, objects to the law on the grounds that it would lead to "a patchwork of state laws" instead of one federal standard. Allies note that the auto industry is already under tremendous financial pressure, with car sales lagging, and can't afford to comply with new regulations.

Supporters of the waiver said the administration could act immediately, without holding any public hearings.

Derek Walker, the California climate program director of the Environmental Defense Fund, said California's request was "unlawfully refused by the Bush administration" and should be granted. He said it would be consistent with Obama's pledge "to make respect for the rule of law a touchstone of his presidency."

In a letter to Obama, Schwarzenegger said the federal government should support "the pioneering leadership" of California and other states that want to act on their own to reduce global warming.

"For four years, California and a growing number of farsighted states have sought to enforce a common-sense policy to reduce global-warming pollution from passenger vehicles, which are the source of 20 percent of our nation's greenhouse gas emissions," the governor wrote. "Regulation will not only reduce these emissions, but will also save drivers money and reduce our nation's dependence on imported oil."

McClintock, a freshman who joined Congress this month, said the governor was using "highly questionable junk science" to defend the law.

"The net effect of his request would add between \$1,000 and \$5,000 to the price of every car sold in California," McClintock said. "Automobile sales normally account for one-fifth of sales taxes paid in the once Golden State and total sales tax receipts are already down \$1.5 billion over the last 12 months. Meanwhile, the governor is also asking the president to bail out California from its growing budget deficit. Just another day in 'reality-challenged' Sacramento."

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