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## California Leads on Warming

**D**espite heavy industry lobbying, California's Legislature approved a bill last week that for the first time would force automakers to limit emissions of carbon dioxide, the gas largely responsible for global warming. The bill is unquestionably the most important step taken in this country to control greenhouse emissions since the Clinton administration signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1998, an agreement President Bush has since renounced. The bill contains no specific mandates beyond the model year (2009) when cleaner cars have to be on the road. Details will be worked out in negotiations between the companies and state regulatory authorities. Nevertheless, assuming Gov. Gray Davis signs the bill, as he apparently plans to do, it will inevitably drive Detroit and other automakers to manufacture more fuel-efficient vehicles.

More broadly, the bill is a potentially monumental step in the war on warming — cars and light trucks account for one-third of greenhouse gas emissions nationwide and 40 percent in California. It is also another reminder, if any were needed, of how sluggish the national government has been in addressing the threat of global climate change. Congress has refused to require any meaningful increase in fuel efficiency since the 1980's. On climate policy generally, Mr. Bush remains fixated on a voluntary approach that promises little hope of meaningful reductions in power plant and other industrial emissions of carbon dioxide.

On the bright side, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee last week approved a bill that would impose mandatory caps on carbon dioxide emissions and three other pollutants — sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and mercury. Mandatory caps of some sort are necessary to contain the gradual — and, if we wait too long, irreversible — buildup of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere. But the bill's margin of approval was razor-thin, and without a courageous conversion or two among prominent Republicans, it stands little chance in the Senate and even less in the House.

One would have expected a greater sense of urgency. Less than a month ago we were treated to an authoritative interagency report, which Mr. Bush belittled, that reinforced earlier warnings from mainstream scientists that unchecked warming will bring devastating consequences, including rising seas, coastal flooding, disruption of snow-fed water supplies, heat waves and the disappearance of sensitive ecosystems like coral reefs.

Then came a more narrowly focused but equally disturbing report by The Times's Timothy Egan about Alaska, where an astonishing seven-degree

increase in average temperatures over 30 years has led to melting permafrost, sagging roads, dying forests, unexpected forest fires and disruption of marine life. Even Ted Stevens, the influential Republican senator from Alaska who usually has little patience with environmentalists, is openly alarmed about global warming's potential cost to his home state, which could run into the billions of dollars, and is privately even more alarmed by Washington's indifference.

It is in this depressing context that California's action is so welcome. The bill is designed to give the automakers great flexibility, and expressly rules out mandatory weight reductions and fuel taxes. Inevitably, though, the automakers will have to achieve fleetwide improvements in fuel economy, which means making more cars that emit less pollution by adding fuel-saving technologies like hybrid engines. California has long been more adventurous than even the federal government in pushing for cleaner cars, and over time this has benefited the nation as a whole because automakers have eventually decided to sell the cars they make for California in other markets.

Once again, the country owes California a vote of thanks.

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