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California Takes on Air Pollution . . .

By Gray Davis

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SACRAMENTO -- California has long been the nation's leader in the fight against air pollution. And with my signature today on groundbreaking legislation to curb carbon pollution and greenhouse gases, California will become an international leader in the fight as well.

The federal government and Congress, by failing to ratify the Kyoto treaty on global warming, have missed their opportunity to do the right thing. So it is left to California, the nation's most populous state and the world's fifth largest economy, to take the lead. We can now join the long-standing and successful effort of European nations against global warming, learn from their experience and build upon it.

The legislation I am signing today will reduce carbon pollution from California vehicles, the world's largest fleet of cars, SUVs and pickups. The requirements for lower emissions will take effect in 2009. They will reduce carbon pollution without compromising Californians' freedom to choose the type of vehicles they want to buy.

Smog first developed in Los Angeles, and California scientists pioneered ways to fight air pollution. We have a 40-year record of success -- and the naysayers have an equally long record of telling us it couldn't be done. Each time they were proven wrong. And in most cases, from cleaner gas to catalytic converters, the nation has followed California's lead and all Americans have been able to breathe a bit easier.

Just as we have relied on sound science in the past, available science and technology will allow California to tackle carbon pollution and the global warming it causes. Carbon dioxide produced by human activity is contributing to global warming, and most (59 percent) of California's carbon dioxide is produced by transportation activities. That is why it makes sense for California to focus on vehicles to begin to reduce carbon pollution.

Our new law is supported by knowledgeable scientists, conservation groups and business leaders and overwhelmingly by average Californians. In itself it will not stop global warming, but it is an important first step for our nation.

How will we reduce vehicle-related carbon dioxide pollution? The California Air Resources Board -- which has a 33-year history of successfully fighting air pollution -- will hold hearings and consult experts, including auto industry representatives. New pollution standards will apply to vehicles sold in California in the 2009 model year.

A number of myths have developed about what our new law does and doesn't do. The law does not mandate a specific technology. Each automaker may take its own route to compliance.

The standards set will be meaningful, but economic realities will be taken into account. California's standards will not mandate smaller, slower or lighter vehicles. Nor will the air board have the power

to raise gasoline prices or tax miles driven. Consumer choice will not be affected. The SUVs or pickups six years from now simply will be higher-quality vehicles.

Standards will apply to a car company's entire California fleet, and each company will be given credit for carbon pollution reductions it can achieve in its nonvehicle operations.

In another first-in-the-nation move, my administration has established the Climate Action Registry. Companies can "bank" credits for carbon reductions achieved before 2009.

A vigorous lobbying campaign by automakers was successful in Congress and nearly stalled California's carbon pollution law, but common sense prevailed. In time, California's pioneering efforts in this area will be seen as no more controversial than requiring seat belts or catalytic converters and even more beneficial to consumers and carmakers over the long haul.

The writer, a Democrat, is governor of California.

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