

Tuesday, December 8, 2008

Dishonest debate

Credible climate policy skeptics are ignored

On Friday, the California Air Resources Board will decide whether to adopt its “scoping plan” for the implementation of AB 32, the 2006 anti-global warming law. It requires state energy suppliers to use far more power from cleaner but more costly sources.

Given that this would impose unique burdens on California businesses, many observers (including this editorial page) have been skeptical and said a national or international approach to global warming makes more sense. The response from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has been that the opposite is true: Far from burdening the economy, the forced transition to new sources of power would touch off a statewide boom as California companies become world leaders in alternate energy and as businesses benefit from efficient new technologies.

The ARB's scoping plan confirms this rosy view. Now, however, several highly credible authorities have emerged to shred these claims.

First, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office – the most respected voice in Sacramento – issued a Nov. 17 analysis that said the ARB's methodology was deeply flawed and often ignored evidence that would counter the economic-boom thesis. Its most startling finding was that the ARB arbitrarily defined any reduction in greenhouse gas emission as being cost-effective. If, say, energy costs double for a small business because of AB 32, how is that possibly cost-effective?

Then came the release of a scathing “peer review” of the scoping plan. Harvard's Robert Stavins wrote that the ARB's “economic analysis is terribly deficient in critical ways” and could not be relied on. Janet Peace and Liwayway Adkins of the Pew Center for Global Climate Change wrote that the analysis “gives the appearance of justifying the chosen package of regulatory measures rather than evaluating it.” Wesleyan University's Gary Yohe wrote it was “almost beyond belief” that the agency could claim vast economic gains and decried the “spurious precision” of its forecasts. UCLA's Matthew Kahn noted the considerable evidence contradicting the ARB's claims that manufacturers, who employ 1.5 million Californians, would not be hurt by higher energy costs. Dallas Burtraw of the Resources for the Future group said the models used by the ARB underestimate costs, wrongly anticipate a “frictionless,” easy transition to new energy sources and are in troubling “harmony” about the economic upside of the scoping plan.

These analyses make it obvious that there must be a do-over on the ARB plan – one that takes an honest look at the effects of AB 32. Instead, both the governor and the ARB are essentially dismissing the LAO and peer-review reports – and as of Friday, the Union-Tribune was the only newspaper in the state to have even mentioned either.

How is this possible? How does this make any sense? How can all the elephants in the room be ignored?

Californians deserve infinitely better from Arnold Schwarzenegger – and from the media.