Plans unveiled to probe EPA's priorities regarding emissions

by Michael Gardner - CNS

SACRAMENTO, Cal. - A powerful Congressional watchdog Thursday unveiled plans to probe whether the federal Environmental Protection Agency put politics ahead of policy in blocking California's first-in-the-nation law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles.

At the White House, President Bush staunchly defended his administration's course and renewed a call for more nuclear power that he suggested would reduce reliance on fossil fuels and trim emissions at the same time.

And in Sacramento, the leader of the state Senate suggested that California explore alternatives, some of which could significantly impact motorists, to stay on track toward emission reduction goals. Among the possibilities: fees on gas guzzlers to discourage driving, incentives to buy fuel-efficient vehicles and more investment in public transit.

Federal EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson on Wednesday rejected California's application for permission to independently regulate carbon dioxide, a dominant greenhouse gas linked to global warming, emitted by vehicles.

It was the first time the EPA had denied such a request from California after granting about 40 applications since the federal Clean Air Act was adopted in 1970. Under the act, California may exceed federal standards as long as it obtains a waiver from the EPA.

An angry Rep. Henry Waxman, chairman of the Congressional Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, immediately accused Johnson and the Bush administration of ignoring scientific evidence in favor of automobile industry allies.

"Your decision not only has important consequences to our nation, but it raises serious questions about the integrity of the decision-making process," Waxman, D-Calif., wrote in a letter to Johnson.

Waxman has built a reputation in Washington as a thorn in the administration's side, using the committee and its subpoena powers to probe Halliburton's dealings in Iraq, the cover-up of the friendly-fire death of Pat Tillman in Afghanistan and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, among other investigations.

Waxman demanded that Johnson turn over a large number of documents related to California's application by

Jan. 23, citing reports that Johnson had overruled the advice of his scientific and legal team. Also, various newspapers have chronicled an intense automaker lobbying campaign that included a meeting with Vice President Dick Cheney.

"This request," Waxman wrote in his letter to Johnson, "includes all communications within the agency and all communications between the agency and persons outside the agency, including persons in the White House."

Mindful of the potential destruction of docments, Waxman said "all staff should be notified immediately to preserve all documents."

Johnson has insisted that he gave a fair hearing to all sides during "hours upon hours of briefings" and considered a variety of options. He also rejected suggestions of meddling from the White House and Detroit.

"My decision was an independent decision," he told reporters a day earlier. The EPA did not respond to a request for comment on Waxman's demands.

President Bush stood by Johnson's decision Thursday, telling reporters that the just-signed energy bill includes a 40 percent jump in fleetwide gas mileage standards by 2020, dramatically reducing tailpipe emissions.

"When you replace as much gasoline on a mandatory basis as we're suggesting, it's going to do a lot to improve the greenhouse gases," the president said.

Bush repeated Johnson's arguments that allowing California to move forward would just result in a patchwork of laws.

"The question is how to have an effective strategy. Is it more effective to let each state make a decision as to how to proceed in curbing greenhouse gases? Or is it more effective to have a national strategy?" the president said.

Critics, however, say the Bush administration overlooks a key point: 17 states have adopted, or plan to enact, California's exact standards - not 17 different sets of regulations. Also, about 40 percent of the nation's populace - 136 million people - live in those states and half of the new cars sold in the country move out of showrooms in those states.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger Thursday reiterated his pledge to sue the Bush administration. "Anything less than aggressive action is inexcusable," the governor said.

Bush, in a press conference, said he "absolutely" takes global warming seriously, "but I want to make sure that we're effective in what we do, and secondly, do not wreck our economy in whatever we do." For some time, the president was reluctant to join international treaties to limit emissions and has vigorously disputed the gravity of the threat.

Continuing, Bush took a jab those demanding tough action on greenhouse gas emissions but who balk at developing nuclear power.

"If you're somebody that says greenhouse gases are of vital national interest, then you ought to be saying I'm for the development of nuclear power plants," the president said.

California's landmark 2003 law would require automakers to gradually reduce tailpipe emissions until reaching a 30 percent cut by 2016.

State lawmakers had actually prepared for the roadblock, inserting language in separate legislation that gives the state Air Resources Board extensive authority to stay on a schedule to roll back emissions from all industries to 1990 levels by 2020.

Senate President Pro Tempore Don Perata, D-Oakland, sent a letter to air board chairwoman Mary Nichols Thursday asking her to pursue other tools while California's expected legal appeals and federal legislation continue.

"As you know, there are numerous proposals both within and outside of the Legislature to promote reductions in auto emissions through efficient car purchase incentives, smart growth investments, increased transit usage and other means," Perata wrote.

"Local governments from San Francisco to New York have proposed small greenhouse gas emission mitigation fees and other measures to reduce vehicular pollution. Any one, or a combination, of these approaches could be employed by the board," he said.

Prior to receiving Perata's letter, Nichols indicated that automakers, through routine technological improvements, will comply with the state's goals - at least for a couple of years. By then, she said, California hopes to have secured its waiver either by court order or from a new president in 2009.

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