

Editorial: Small steps add up to cleaner air

EARLY ACTION RULES WOULD BE EASY TO ENACT

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Check car tires to make sure they're properly inflated. Outfit trucks with aerodynamic tires. Shut off the auxiliary engines of docked ships and make them plug into shoreside electrical outlets.

These aren't groundbreaking ideas, but each would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. So it was good to see the California Air Resources Board propose them last week, along with three other relatively simple steps to move California closer to its goal of cutting greenhouse gas emissions roughly 25 percent by 2020.

The latest proposals signaled that the agency may be back on track in implementing AB 32, the state's landmark global warming law enacted last year. The board had faltered with a timid set of carbon reduction measures in June and then underwent a leadership shake-up in July.

Now the agency is led by a respected environmentalist, Mary Nichols, and its climate change staff that numbered just a dozen six months ago is expanding to more than 125 after its budget was increased this summer.

The air board should approve the six new proposals in October and keep doing the right things - big and small. The small steps - the low-hanging fruit - can add up to something significant.

The six new "early action" proposals involve no major technology innovations. Outfitting trucks with front shields and tires that are aerodynamic should be a no-brainer. So should requiring oil change and tuneup technicians to do tire pressure checks so that cars run efficiently. Many routinely do this already.

Regulators estimate that the six proposals would reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions by 2.8 million metric tons a year, making a small but important dent in California's goal of cutting 174 million metric tons annually.

They follow the air board's adoption in June of three other "early action" steps under AB 32 - a low-carbon fuel standard, restrictions on do-it-yourself air conditioner repairs, and a requirement for methane capture by municipal landfills.

Most of the air board's early actions pale next to bigger, groundbreaking changes that the governor, Legislature and numerous state agencies have undertaken. For instance, the low-carbon fuel standard requires that motor vehicle fuels contribute 10 percent less carbon dioxide to the atmosphere by 2020, while a 2002 clean-cars law calls for a 30 percent cut in greenhouse gas emissions from new passenger vehicles by 2016. Other laws require California utilities to get at least 20 percent of their power from renewable fuels by 2010.

There is no silver bullet for rolling back carbon emissions. It's going to take a portfolio of bold strokes and modest steps. Regulators need to keep their eyes on both.