

Jerry Brown Has a Head of Steam

He's already filed one lawsuit against the Bush administration over its environmental policies. As California's colorful attorney general arrives in Washington, he's threatening another.



Justin Sullivan / Getty Images

Brown: The White House is 'engaging in an elaborate smoke dance to cover their do-nothing approach'

May 21, 2007 - Time hasn't mellowed Jerry Brown much. It has been 30 years since he arrived on the political scene in California as a young governor and Democratic presidential candidate. Since then, he's studied Buddhism, tended to the sick alongside Mother Theresa, held forth as a radio talk-show host and run the city of Oakland. Throughout, he's been a firebrand on environmental issues—and he's continued that crusade in his current job as California's attorney general.

Since the Supreme Court ruled last month that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are pollutants subject to regulation by the Environmental Protection Agency, individual states—led

by California—have been pushing the federal government to restrict greenhouse gases emitted by cars, known as “tailpipe emissions.” On Tuesday, Brown will ask the EPA to allow California and 12 other states to impose their own stricter standards on tailpipe emissions—or else, he says, California will sue the federal government. Although Brown took office only four months ago, this is not his first environmental battle with the Bush administration: last week, California sued the administration in federal court, arguing that Washington’s fuel-economy standards for SUVs are too lax [the Bush administration believes the fleet average is sufficient—and points out that the president has ordered tougher standards for the future]. With his black Labrador Dharma at his side, Brown spoke with NEWSWEEK’s Karen Breslau in San Francisco. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: You're taking the feds to task for what?

Jerry Brown: For not doing anything. [Last week], we were in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals here in San Francisco arguing that the Bush administration's standards for SUV mileage were pathetic. I'd even say scandalous. They are calling for an increase of one mile a gallon. One. They haven't really taken a real step at fuel efficiency and reducing global warming. The point is, we have a crisis in terms of our oil dependency, unstable Middle East, rising gas prices and worsening climate change.

The president recently said virtually the same thing about the need to reduce the country's oil addiction.

Then why hasn't he done it? Why didn't he [raise fuel-economy standards] by 10 miles a gallon, or why didn't he say it five years ago? No, Bush and [Vice President Dick] Cheney are oil people. They think like oil people, they act like oil people. Oil people want to sell oil. They love the high price, which is caused by the scarcity, which is caused by the excess consumption. If cars in America were dramatically more efficient, the price of oil would be lower today. That's the facts. I mean we have an oil administration. That's in part why they went into Iraq; it's all tied together. It's profit; it's real money to real people. And that's what's at stake here.

So you are going after the federal government on two fronts: reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and increasing vehicle fuel-efficiency standards?

The very day Bush is in the Rose Garden talking about a plan to reduce fuel consumption, he has his own lawyers in San Francisco defending a fuel-efficiency standard for light trucks that calls for an increase of 1.3 miles per gallon. It's not serious—relative to the magnitude of the problem, relative to the climate change, to our oil dependency, to terrorism.

[America] ridiculed [former president Jimmy] Carter, but he warned us. Congress first passed [fuel-economy] standards in 1975. The auto standards haven't increased since 1985. What we have here is a White House that is engaging in an elaborate smoke dance to cover their do-nothing approach. It's dangerous, it's scandalous, and I'm doing everything I can to expose it. If Bush wants to do anything, he can tell his EPA to grant California its waiver, and then California and 12 other states that have signed on can reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse-gas emissions from automobiles.

And cutting greenhouse gases is California's way of ordering an increase in fuel efficiency at the same time?

That's certainly one way to do it. Under the Clean Air Act, California historically has been

granted the permission to set its own stricter standards. Once the Supreme Court says that carbon dioxide is a pollutant, California can say under the Clean Air Act "Cut your CO2." The automobile companies need to figure out how to do that. One of the ways to do that is to reduce the amount of gasoline they burn. And the practical effect is that they'll have to be more efficient, or get us electric cars, get us a new engine. But they killed the electric car too. [The auto industry] is fighting; their survival as they see it depends on doing virtually nothing about either oil dependency or CO2.

What are you basing that on?

They've rigged the [fuel-efficiency] standards in a way to encourage bigger cars. The car companies spend more money on bigger cars. The bigger the car, the bigger the profit. The bigger the car, the bigger the pollution, the bigger the gas consumption. The auto industry can make some good cars; but they make more money on big trucks. They have to sacrifice climate stability and people's health for their profit. That's not right, and the only way they can be corrected is to be given assistance by government intervention.

When I was governor [from 1975-1983], the fight was over reducing nitrous oxide. We managed to do it dramatically. We finally met with Henry Ford, and he found a way to do it, but the other companies were fighting us, and they fought on seatbelts, they fought on airbags, catalytic converters. They always have fought California on standards.

So California is returning to its role as a forcer of technology?

That's the whole point, we've always forced the federal government, and that's the function of the waiver. And that waiver was created by Richard Nixon, and that waiver was first granted by Ronald Reagan ... Nixon and Reagan have given us a framework that George Bush is sabotaging.

Do you and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger see eye to eye on this?

Yes, yes we do.

So, when you say that Bush is "perpetrating a fraud ..."

Well, no, he might not say that about that.

Is that what you are going to tell the EPA?

No, I'm going to make the best case I can, with due respect toward our authority. But ... the history of this thing, the story of global warming is getting more ominous by the year. We're seeing more ice melt from Greenland, from Antarctica. Glaciers. This is happening. Asthma, hay fever, there is a lowering in the quality of life. And because we are talking about global pollution you can't turn around overnight. And every year we wait, it makes it that much more expensive and that much more difficult to stabilize the climate.

So, you'd like the EPA to tell California, "Go ahead and set your own standards for cars," and have the other states follow?

California is ready for action, and we have a Republican governor who's very popular. Given the declining fortunes of the GOP, I would think that [Bush] would listen to one of its biggest stars.

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