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By Michael Gardner

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SACRAMENTO – In the coming months, the state's top air-quality regulators will pursue a grinding schedule packed with consequences for millions of Californians, whether in their cars, on the job or at home. The California Air Resources Board has been edging forward on a series of far-reaching regulations, although many have been overshadowed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's international campaign to slow global warming.

“I don't know when I've seen such a diversity of issues before us in such a relatively short period of time,” said Ron Roberts, a San Diego County supervisor and air board member for 12 years. “I can't remember anything that quite compares to this.”

The board's targets include ports, diesel trucks and heavy-duty equipment, cigarettes and indoor air cleaners.

Jostling over money also looms. Regulators are preparing to spend \$1 billion in voter-approved bond funds for clean-air initiatives related to moving goods by ship, rail or truck.

The agenda could be made even more daunting by political upheaval that has yet to subside.

The Senate Rules Committee Tuesday convened an unusual pre-confirmation hearing to secure commitments from Schwarzenegger's air board chairwoman, Mary Nichols.

Nichols' appointment drew widespread praise from most quarters, but Senate Democrats want to question Nichols over how she plans to implement controversial regulations to curb greenhouse-gas emissions. Democrats also want to gauge whether she can stand up to the Republican governor – and his inner circle – when necessary.

“We just want some basis on which to evaluate her performance,” said Senate President Pro Tempore Don Perata, D-Oakland. “I see this as a friendly conversation.”

Nichols' appointment took effect immediately, and she can serve up to a year without Senate confirmation. Senate Democrats hope to compare performance with her promises when formal confirmation proceedings take place, probably not until spring, Perata said.

Clean-air advocates have lauded Nichols, a former chief environmental aide to former Democratic Gov. Gray Davis. They, too, will look for signs of interference from Schwarzenegger or his top advisers, Susan Kennedy and Dan Dunmoyer, who have business-friendly reputations.

“We are all going to be watching very closely to make sure Mary Nichols is provided the autonomy and independence she needs to protect public health and air quality,” said Bonnie Holmes-Gen, who monitors the board for the American Lung Association.

The governor recently fired board chairman Robert Sawyer, a highly respected clean-air expert. In the fallout, the board's chief executive officer quit in protest, claiming Schwarzenegger's team meddled in air board matters on industry's behalf.

There was one stinging moment Tuesday during her testimony involving a controversial extension of time to meet federal clean-air standards in the San Joaquin Valley. Schwarzenegger's team had cited Sawyer's calls for an extension as one reason for his ouster.

Like Sawyer before her, Nichols told Sen. Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield, that she would like to see the extension at least shortened, but that the chronic air pollution and available remedies simply will not allow the valley to meet the deadline.

“Which is exactly what Dr. Sawyer said,” noted Ashburn. “So, if he was fired for saying that and you come into office taking the very same position, then what's the difference?”

Despite the unfolding drama, California is expected to sustain its reputation as a national trendsetter on global warming and other pollution issues, said William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies.

“Nothing's changed,” Becker said. “State and national air pollution agencies look first to California for its leadership, for its experiences as laboratories of innovation.”

Becker called the staff upheaval “a slight hiccup” that will pass as other pressing issues retake the stage.

The first test comes July 26, when California regulators look to crack down on diesel equipment used by construction companies, ports and ski resorts. Industry – and its allies within the Schwarzenegger administration – have appealed for leniency.

The heavily lobbied regulation, which includes phasing out dirty diesel engines over the next dozen years, could cost companies \$3 billion, according to air board figures. Contractors say the price is closer to \$13 billion and could shut down companies, tossing thousands out of work.

Construction industry representative John Dunlap, a former air board chairman under Republican Gov. Pete Wilson, said he recognizes the board will be watched closely in the wake of the tumult.

Dunlap said a meeting with high-level regulators left him with “assurances they were committed to taking up this issue with a new eye.” Labor and company officials unveiled a compromise that would provide more time and incentives to comply.

After the showdown over diesel, regulators will be staring at dockets that include old headaches never cured.

“I see it as catch-up,” said Tim Carmichael, policy director of the Coalition for Clean Air. “They have fallen significantly behind on their commitments to reduce air pollution.”

Major debates ahead for the 11-member board include:

Zero-emission vehicles: The board will review automaker rules four years after retreating from the nation's toughest requirements to sell more electric cars. Regulators may look at new mandates in light of changing technology, particularly the approaching era of plug-in hybrids, which can be recharged in a standard wall socket.

Smoking: The board is researching programs to reduce public exposure after declaring secondhand smoke a toxic risk. The effort could range from stepped-up public education to limits on smoking in public places, such as parks, bus stops and beaches.

Air cleaners: The board will consider standards for popular indoor air cleaners that actually might pose a health hazard.

Ports: In addition to considering more restrictions on diesel equipment at ports, the board is drafting proposals to encourage cruise lines and container vessels to turn off their engines while docked and instead draw on port-provided electric power. Requirements for cleaner fuels powering vessels also are being initiated.

Commercial boats: The board is exploring new regulations to cut pollution coming from harbor craft, such as fishing boats, tour boats, tugboats and ferries.

Fuels: The board is likely to adopt programs to encourage growth in alternative fuels, from ethanol to biodiesel. It's part of a far-reaching campaign to reduce reliance on carbon-based fossil fuels.

Diesel trucks: Plans are being readied for more forceful rules to curb pollution from diesel trucks separate from the proposed regulations on off-road construction equipment.

San Joaquin Valley: The board will take up proposals to reduce intense pollution in the San Joaquin Valley, from Bakersfield to Stockton.

Global warming incentives: In probably the most controversial and time-consuming task, regulators must adopt mandatory greenhouse-gas reductions. Those rules likely will be tempered by market-based incentives that would allow companies to buy and sell pollution credits to minimize the economic effects.

Global warming costs: The board might consider fees on business and motorists to offset the cost of new controls.

Global warming early action: The board again will ponder whether to expand the number of immediate steps it can order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The board in June adopted three such programs, drawing fire for not going further, faster.