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Schwarzenegger May Lose a Bit of His Eco-Luster

By JESSE MCKINLEY

SAN FRANCISCO, July 5 — In the last year or so, Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) — he of the incredible orange perma-tan — has had a remarkably green tint.

In September, Mr. Schwarzenegger, a [Republican](#), signed into law a landmark emissions-reduction measure and then drove a green bus during his easy, breezy re-election campaign. Since then, he has announced that he will buy offsets for his own personal carbon emissions, threatened to sue the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) over air quality and appeared on the cover of Newsweek spinning a globe on his finger.

“Save the Planet,” the headline read. “Or Else.”

But the Governor’s eco-friendly reputation may have taken a dent over the last week in a messy battle over the leadership of the California Air Resources Board, a science-gearred agency that has traditionally operated with considerable autonomy, even though its 11 members are political appointees. Its most visible mandate is the nuts and bolts of putting the emissions law, known as AB 32, into effect.

The conflict, which resulted in the top two officials leaving the board, raised some environmental eyebrows, especially among those who have admired Mr.

Schwarzenegger’s strong-willed approach.

“We have schizophrenia here,” said James Marston, a lobbyist for Environmental Defense who worked on passing the emissions law. “Even while we were doing AB 32, the Schwarzenegger administration was a little schizophrenic.”

“We’ve got Schwarzenegger and Maria and a few other folks who are very pro-environment,” Mr. Marston said, referring to Maria Shriver, the governor’s wife. “Then we have some folks that are more traditional Republicans in the sense that they see themselves as defenders of the business interests.”

V. John White, the executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, a nonprofit environmental advocacy group, echoed that point. “The moves of last week caused damage to the brand of Arnold,” Mr. White said.

Some Democrats in Sacramento, the state capital, also seized upon the air board issue to criticize the Schwarzenegger administration’s progress on the emissions law. The State Assembly plans oversight hearings on Friday to investigate the situation and the departure of the two officials on the air quality board.

“There’s an obvious difference to what he’s been saying and what his administration and other appointees have been doing,” said Don Perata, a Democrat who is president pro tempore of the State Senate. “There’s some real knuckle draggers over there.”

Adam Mendelsohn, the governor’s director of communications, strongly denied any assertion that there had been a lessening of environmental will in the administration.

“Some Democrats in [California](#) have been trying for months to undermine the governor’s accomplishments on the environment,” Mr. Mendelsohn said. “There’s absolutely no way that the failure of AB 32 is an option for Governor Schwarzenegger.” Considering how closely the bill is being watched in California and other states, it is probably not surprising that the changes at the air board attracted attention.

The rumblings began last Thursday when the governor's office announced that it had fired the chairman of the board, Dr. Robert Sawyer. Officials said Mr. Schwarzenegger was displeased with the board's decision to delay an antismog plan for the San Joaquin Valley.

Dr. Sawyer disputed that account, saying that the 11-member board's autonomy had been compromised by meddling and political pressure to back off certain aggressive environmental proposals.

"I felt there was undue interference from the governor's staff on what should be an independent board," Dr. Sawyer said Tuesday. "And I objected to the mixed messages we were getting from the governor's office. And I was fired."

That opinion was seconded days later by Catherine Witherspoon, the board's executive officer, who resigned on Monday, citing Dr. Sawyer's firing as the cause.

"He was going around the country and going around the world seeking partners, and I was willing to go along," Ms. Witherspoon said Thursday of Mr. Schwarzenegger. "I just kind of took a deep breath and was willing to be micromanaged. But when the action governor is saying, 'Don't act, don't act, don't act,' something has gone desperately wrong."

Ms. Witherspoon, who started her career at the air board in the early 1980s, also cited last year's departure of Terry Tamminen, an influential member of the governor's cabinet and a prominent environmental advocate, as a sign of possible weakening of green influence.

But Mr. Mendelsohn said Mr. Tamminen, now a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, a public policy institute, continued to counsel the governor on energy and environmental policy. "Terry is still very much a part of what we do," he said.

Mr. Mendelsohn also cited the reputation of Dr. Sawyer's successor — Mary Nichols, a veteran environmental lawyer and a senior official at the Environmental Protection Agency in the Clinton administration — as evidence of his boss's commitment to being green.

"You have to look at who he replaced Sawyer with for the ultimate judge of whether that story carries any creditability," he said. "Mary Nichols's record on the environment proves that this attack is just a convenient line of criticism for partisans."

Environmental lobbyists agreed that the appointment of Ms. Nichols was a good move, saying that her reputation would do quite a bit to mend any damage caused by Dr. Sawyer's firing.

"Putting Mary Nichols in charge of the air board is making a huge signal to making this thing work," said Ann Notthoff, the California advocacy director for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#). "She's not the kind of person you can push around."

Likewise, even critics of the governor's handling of the air board agree that he cares about the environment, though they do not always agree with his methods.

"The governor believes in what he's doing," Senator Perata said. "What he doesn't have a grasp of is how you get from rhetoric to reality."

Felicity Barringer contributed reporting.