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State can be leader on clean car standards.

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Byline: GUEST VIEWPOINT By Ronald Mitchell For The Register-Guard

Oregon has an opportunity to help lead the way in addressing the problem of global warming while also reducing air pollution levels right here in this state.

The Oregon Environmental Quality Commission is currently deciding whether Oregon should adopt "clean car standards" to require that by 2016, but starting in 2009, all new cars sold in Oregon produce 30 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions than they do now.

It is important the EQC build on the momentum that has been created by Gov. Ted Kulongoski's impressive leadership in identifying global warming as a key concern for Oregonians. He is working with other West Coast states to address the problem regionally.

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Here in Oregon, Kulongoski had the vision both to appoint a Governor's Advisory Group on Global Warming and to implement that group's recommendations. The advisory group urged the governor to adopt clean car standards as an important and cost-effective first step that Oregon could take to reduce the risk of global warming.

Greenhouse gases emitted by cars in Oregon are only a small part of the total global warming problem. But our actions are an important way that Oregon can be a leader and foster larger changes.

Adopting these standards will create a "clean car corridor" along the whole West Coast. As the group of states adopting these standards grows, economic forces will lead automakers to start producing all their cars to these specifications, so that cars sold in all 50 states and in other countries also will be cleaner and more environmentally friendly. Adopting these standards also allows Oregon to send a strong signal to other states, the federal government, and other countries that acting to avert global warming and climate change is the right thing to do.

Scientists predict that the consequences of global warming linked to increased use of fossil fuels will include rising ocean levels with significant increases in coastal flooding, higher average temperatures with more deaths in summer heat waves, and more intense storms and hurricanes. Here in Oregon, we can expect more and fiercer forest fires, increased coastal erosion and a reduced winter snowpack, which will affect flood management, salmon recovery, power generation and agricultural production.

The advisory group supported adoption of the clean car standards as an important step in addressing global warming, a step that just makes sense. Ten other states (including Washington) and Canada have already adopted similar standards, representing one-third of the North American auto market.

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This broadening adoption of these standards reflects the range of benefits they offer. Clean car standards can significantly reduce overall emissions of greenhouse gases. Vehicles are major sources of carbon dioxide, a major contributor to global warming. Nearly 40 percent of Oregon's carbon dioxide emissions come from transportation, so clean car standards are a good place to start. But these standards will push auto manufacturers to decrease other pollutants that are either toxic or contribute to smog and other local air pollution. Oregonians will breathe cleaner and healthier air.

These standards also offer other benefits. The standards are required by law to save car buyers money over the life of their cars. Automakers can meet the standards by incorporating existing technologies into a much broader array of cars and trucks. These technologies reduce greenhouse gases by increasing fuel efficiency. Consumers will recoup the higher initial purchase price of a car through savings at the gas pump, savings that will be even greater as gasoline prices continue to increase.

Greater fuel efficiency also provides an important benefit in increasing our energy independence. Pumping less gas means buying less oil from other countries. Becoming less dependent on foreign oil provides America greater freedom to make foreign and domestic policy decisions free of the constraints and concerns that our current oil dependence entails.

The EQC will hold public hearings in Medford, Bend, Pendleton and Portland in late February on final adoption of the clean car standards. The public comment period will end on March 3. Those concerned about climate change can learn more at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality's Web site (www.deq.state.or.us/aq/aqplanning/ORLEV/) and should contact DEQ and the EQC to express their support for adopting these new standards.

Ronald Mitchell, a professor of political science at the University of Oregon, served on the Governor's Advisory Group on Global Warming. The views expressed here are his own.

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