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The Terminator vs. Big Oil

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The Terminator, aka the Governor, is not happy. And you shouldn't be either.

What has Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California incensed is the fact that two Texas oil companies with two refineries each in California are financing a campaign to roll back California's landmark laws to slow global warming and promote clean energy innovation, because it would require the refiners to install new emission-control tools. At a time when President Obama and Congress have failed to pass a clean energy bill, California's laws are the best thing we have going to stimulate clean-tech in America. We don't want them gutted. C'mon in. This is a fight worth having.

Here are the basics: Next month Californians will vote on "Prop 23," a proposal to effectively kill implementation of California's Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, known as A.B. 32. It was supported by Republicans, Democrats, businesses and environmentalists. Prop 23 proposes to suspend implementation of A.B. 32 until California achieves four consecutive quarters of unemployment below 5.5 percent. It is currently above 12 percent. (Sorry for all the numbers. Just remember: A.B. 32, good; Prop 23, bad.)

A.B. 32 was designed to put California on a path to reducing greenhouse gases in its air to 1990 levels by 2020. This would make the state a healthier place, and a more innovative one. Since A.B. 32 was passed, investors have poured billions of dollars into making new technologies to meet these standards.

"It is very clear that the oil companies from outside the state that are trying to take out A.B. 32, and trying to take out our environmental laws, have no interest in suspending it, but just to get rid of it," Governor Schwarzenegger said at an energy forum we both participated in last week in Sacramento, sponsored by its energetic mayor, Kevin Johnson. "They want to kill A.B. 32. Otherwise they wouldn't put this provision in there about the 5.5 percent unemployment rate. It's very rare that California in the last 40

years had an unemployment rate of below 5.5 percent for four consecutive quarters. They're not interested in our environment; they are only interested in greed and filling their pockets with more money.

“And they are very deceptive when they say they want to go and create more jobs in California,” the governor added. “Since when has [an] oil company ever been interested in jobs? Let's be honest. If they really are interested in jobs, they would want to protect A.B. 32, because actually it's green technology that is creating the most jobs right now in California, 10 times more than any other sector.”

No, this is not about jobs. As ThinkProgress.org, a progressive research center, reported: Two Texas oil companies, Valero and Tesoro, “have led the charge against the landmark climate law, along with Koch Industries, the giant oil conglomerate owned by right-wing megafunders Charles and David Koch. Koch recently donated \$1 million to the effort and has been supporting front groups involved in the campaign.”

Fortunately, Californians from across the political spectrum are trying to raise money to defeat Prop 23, but the vote could be close. George Shultz, a former secretary of state during the Reagan administration, has taken a leading role in the campaign against Prop 23. (See: www.stopdirtyenergyprop.com.)

“Prop 23 is designed to kill by indefinite postponement California's effort to clean up the environment,” said Mr. Shultz. “This effort is financed heavily by money from out of state. You have to conclude that the financiers are less concerned about California than they are about the fact that if we get something that is working here to clean up the air and launch a clean-tech industry, it will go national and maybe international. So the stakes are high. I hope we can win here and send a message to the whole country that it's time to put aside partisan politics and get an energy bill out of Washington.”

Dan Becker, a veteran environmental lobbyist, echoes that view: “Now that industry and their friends in Congress have blocked progress there, the hope for action moves to the states” and the Environmental Protection Agency. “Unfortunately,” he added, “polluter lobbyists are tight on our heels. They've offered Senate amendments to block the E.P.A. from using the Clean Air Act to cut power plant pollution. Since that failed, they are trying to block California from moving forward. ... If the people of California see through the misrepresentations of the oil industry, it throws climate denialism off the tracks and

opens the door for a return to a science-based approach to the climate. It would be a triumph for the National Academy of Sciences over the National Academy of Fraud.”

The real joke is thinking that if California suspends its climate laws that Mother Nature will also take a timeout. “We can wait to solve this problem as long as we want,” says Nate Lewis, an energy chemist at the California Institute of Technology: “But Nature is balancing its books every day. It was a record 113 degrees in Los Angeles the other day. There are laws of politics and laws of physics. Only the latter can’t be repealed.”