Magical thinking won’t reverse climate change

The Sacramento Bee 3-29-17
BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

California Air Resources Board Chairwoman Mary Nichols asked an excellent question of automakers the other day.

“What were you thinking when you threw yourselves upon the mercy of the Trump administration to try to solve your problems?” she asked representatives of foreign and domestic automakers.

It’s a question we ask, too. Auto executives and workers offered themselves up as Trump’s backdrop two weeks ago when he traveled to Ypsilanti, Mich., to announce plans to turn back the clock on emission and gas mileage standards.

On Tuesday, Nichols, a Jerry Brown appointee, offered a similar, and similarly pointed, observation after Trump issued an executive order he promised would bring back the coal industry’s smudged old glory.

“While the rest of the world and many states are moving toward clean energy and good clean tech jobs, this move will set America’s economy back by at least a generation,” Nichols said.

Trump’s order will roll back the Obama administration’s directives in 10 areas, including requirements that power plants reduce greenhouse gas emissions, that the oil and gas industry limit methane emissions, and that they reduce the impact of fracking on groundwater.

“That is what this is all about: bringing back our jobs, bringing back our dreams and making America wealthy again,” Trump said at the EPA headquarters, using coal miners as his prop.

In reality, Trump’s order harkens to a time when the air was thick with smog. It’s not a time that Californians of a certain age remember fondly. Perhaps there will be some short-term gains in some coal states. But coal plants are mostly being shuttered because of fracking, not regulation. Utilities are coming to rely on wind and solar power and far less expensive natural gas to fire power plants.

The Trump administration has not yet tried to revoke California’s waiver to the federal Clean Air Act. Under that waiver, California can go beyond federal requirements as it tries to clear the air; 15 other states that are home to 130 million people follow our lead.

That special permission is in place until 2025, but EPA Director Scott Pruitt is exploring ways to unravel the waiver. We urge that the administration not take that step, and not just because it would
immediately result in costly and time-consuming litigation.

Relying on California’s work, the Obama administration developed mileage standards requiring that automakers’ fleets reach an average of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025. Meeting in Riverside last week, Nichols and the Air Resources Board reaffirmed those standards.

The board went further, pushing to vastly accelerate the development of electric vehicles and place 4 million zero-emission vehicles on the road by 2030.

Ambitious? Perhaps. The market for SUVs and monster pickup trucks won’t go away. But there’s demand for zero-emission vehicles, too. No fewer than 22 electric vehicle models are available now. They would not exist if California had not forced the issue. And upwardly mobile Americans, who now aspire to Teslas, might still be guzzling fossil fuel in Escalades.

That’s why Nichols is right to wonder what our president is thinking. Time passes. Markets change. All the executive orders in the world won’t make Americans want the smog and coal fires of Trump’s youthful heyday or to executive-order climate change away.