

China pollution may hold silver lining for California

By Anthony York, staff writer

Los Angeles Times, April 10, 2013

BEIJING — As Gov. Jerry Brown tours some of China's economic hubs this week, he is breathing the kind of heavy, soiled air that blanketed Los Angeles decades ago.

The soot and smog that are byproducts of this country's industrial progress are choking its people and threatening its economy. Chinese leaders are talking openly about the need to clean up the air, and to learn how from California.

So Brown and a large delegation of business and political leaders have come to lend a hand, as well as to leverage China's need into business deals.

Brown made his agenda clear not long after he arrived in Beijing, a city so gridlocked in traffic that parts of his schedule are being upended to account for the time he spends trapped in it.

"We're from California," the governor said, addressing the dozens of delegates at a lavish dinner Tuesday in a restaurant that 400 years ago served as a palace for a Qing Dynasty prince. "We're not interested in politics. We're interested in business."

On Wednesday, he held a private meeting with Environmental Protection Minister Zhou Shengxian. They signed a nonbinding agreement "to enhance cooperation on reducing air pollution," the first such accord between China's government and a U.S. state and one of several Brown is scheduled to secure while here.

Under the pact, California will help China set up institutions to regulate air quality, similar to those the state has established, and the two nations will engage in research projects "of mutual interest."

Later in the day, the governor addressed about 250 businesspeople, mostly Americans, in a ballroom at the Peninsula Hotel, where the shops sell Louis Vuitton and Chanel. The first question concerned pollution.

"The fact of the matter is, that can be cleaned up," Brown said. Compared with the days when Los Angeles was dense with smog, "the air is well over 90% cleaner... with millions of more cars on the road," he said.

The Chinese have expressed eagerness to adopt more clean technologies and use them to enlarge that part of their economy. The nation is ranked by the accounting firm Ernst and Young as the world's most attractive market for renewable energy projects.

And California, which bet heavily on the development of clean technologies, wants to export them as widely as possible. The embrace of California know-how by the world's most populous country — and recent convert to green energy — can help bolster the state's reputation as an international environmental trailblazer.

As Brown talks about environmental protection with officials in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, he is expected to find receptive audiences for the California prescription: regulations that foster cleaner-burning power plants and factories, requirements for more energy from renewable sources and an emphasis on conservation.

"Everybody's got to do the maximum. China is key," Brown told reporters recently. "They're crucial to even our plans."

China is more open to help from California than from elsewhere, experts say.

"California is perceived in China as a leader in cleaning up the environment without any ulterior motive," said Yunshi Wang, director of the China Center for Energy and Transportation at UC Davis. "If these requests or demands come from Washington or Brussels, there's some attitude in China that it's some kind of effort to slow them down economically."

China is responsible for burning nearly half of the world's coal and producing nearly a quarter of the carbon dioxide, a gas scientists say is a leading cause of global climate change. Those emissions have

grown as the nation's economy has boomed over the last decade and more people have pushed into the teeming cities from rural areas.

That movement and the country's growing prosperity have made China the largest car market in the world. But much of the clean-air technology in new cars is counteracted by China's dirty fuel. Brown had remarked on his arrival that the masses of bicyclists he saw here in the 1980s seemed to have been replaced with drivers.

"It looks like any city in Europe or the United States," he said. "There's been a radical transformation."

Even on days with relatively good air quality, like the ones cold winds brought to Beijing this week, many residents wear surgical masks when they go out. Growing citizen anger, evident in violent protests over the last year, has spurred the government — unwilling to impose strict environmental regulations in the past — to action.

"Air pollution has moved to the top of the policy agenda here," said Barbara Finamore, who is based in Hong Kong as Asia director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

In the Los Angeles Basin in 1980, smog levels for eight-hour periods violated the federal standard 98 times. In 2012, that happened just once, according to figures from the California Air Resources Board, chief enforcer of the state's environmental laws.

By contrast, smog is getting worse in Beijing, a city of more than 20 million people. This year, the U.S. Embassy here, which has begun posting pollution levels on its Twitter feed, reported an air-quality rating of 755 on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's index. Anything above 300 is considered hazardous.

Similar problems beset other cities. The air in Chongqing and Guangzhou, a southern city of more than 12 million people that Brown will visit this week, is sometimes worse than Beijing's, according to official Chinese news reports.

Brown has acknowledged the limits of the compacts he's signing. But he mused before leaving Sacramento last week that they could help lay the groundwork for more significant accords between Washington and Beijing.

"There's tensions between the United States and China," Brown said. "California is not in that geopolitical domain, and I think we can be a good bridge to keep open a very friendly and positive relationship."

Among the things California will do is provide guidance for Chinese provinces trying to develop a pollution-credit market to reduce harmful emissions. California's system, the second largest in the world, limits the volume of air pollutants that may be released in the state each year but allows high polluters, such as some power plants and factories, to buy permits to emit more than their share.

This week, Brown will sign agreements to share information with leaders in the southern province of Guangdong, who are working on a carbon-trading market. The governor, accompanied by advisors who can offer expertise, is expected to invite Chinese officials to California this year to learn from state regulators and scientists.

Among those here who see business opportunities in China's environmental needs is Mike Hart, president and CEO of Sierra Energy, which specializes in converting trash into energy. His firm is working on a deal with a Chinese company to build a plant that will convert 500 tons of trash a day into electricity to power about 20,000 Chinese homes. Hart estimated the deal is worth about \$80 million.

Also on the trip is Margaret Wong, CEO of the Sacramento-based McWong Environmental Technology, which specializes in wastewater treatment.

Wong already does extensive business in China, including numerous projects with Baosteel, the government-run steel producer that is third-largest in the world. And she has signed a \$100-million deal to build and operate a water treatment facility at a chemical plant in Anhui province.

Brown urges China to cut air pollution

By David Siders

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Apr. 11, 2013

BEIJING – Less than 48 hours after landing in Beijing, Gov. Jerry Brown appealed to an audience in this heavily polluted city today to step up efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, expanding for a global audience on a case he has made for decades in California.

"The problem of dealing with climate is not an optional kind of problem," Brown told about 200 people at Tsinghua University in Beijing. "It's mandatory. There is no escape. ... Nature doesn't play games."

The speech was the most explicit yet in a series of public events Brown arranged to highlight environmental policies while on a week-long trade mission to China. The Democratic governor, a longtime champion of environmental causes, is making climate change a focus of his first official trip abroad since taking office in 2011.

Brown's overtures come at an opportune time: Record air pollution in Beijing earlier this year raised local alarms about the country's poor air quality. China's new leadership is discussing a potential tax on carbon emissions, and several local, carbon-related initiatives have gained attention in provinces around China.

"We've got a new administration, the air pollution in January and February was the worst it's been, and you had the media – state or private – reporting on it broadly," said Alvin Lin, China climate and energy policy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council in Beijing. "You're starting to see a little bit of a shift."

The country's environmental policies are significant internationally because of China's size. Not only have scientists documented particulate pollution blowing over from the Middle Kingdom to California, but China is now the world's largest producer of carbon dioxide, and activists fear that emissions there may minimize the effect of efforts elsewhere to combat climate change.

"China is key," Brown said before traveling to the country. "So goes China, so goes the world."

California is widely viewed as a model for vehicle emission standards and renewable energy policies, and here in China's capital city, interest in Brown and his advisers is high. A group of nongovernment organizations working on environmental issues overfilled a small conference room at the Grand Hyatt Beijing on Tuesday for a discussion with regulators from the California Energy Commission and California Environmental Protection Agency.

For better or worse, said Robert Weisenmiller, chairman of the California Energy Commission, "what China's doing is going to overwhelm California."

Brown met privately Wednesday with China's minister of environmental protection, Zhou Shengxian, and they signed a nonbinding, largely ceremonial agreement to share information about regulatory practices and policies to reduce pollution.

Following his address at Tsinghua University, Brown was scheduled today to ride the bullet train from Beijing to Shanghai, where he is expected to continue pressing Chinese audiences on climate change.

The high-profile nature of the appearances will likely serve to burnish Brown's reputation abroad as an environmentalist.

His potential effect on China's environmental policies, however, remains uncertain. While Beijing forced hundreds of thousands of vehicles off the roads and shuttered factories to clear the air in time for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, five years later factories have resumed operation, and enforcement of fuel and other standards has relaxed, Weisenmiller said.

Heavy smog in the city forces residents to stay indoors some days, and surgical masks are a typical part of the local wardrobe.

"In some sense, it's like Jerry goes to China," said Maximilian Auffhammer, an environmental economist at the University of California, Berkeley. "But I think it's meaningful. The Chinese are starting to talk about a carbon tax, and from what I can tell they're serious about it."

Auffhammer called Brown "the most progressive governor in terms of carbon in the U.S.," and he said that if the United States and China "got together and said we're going to do something meaningful ... then we're talking."

Brown's visit to China comes five months after California held its first auction of carbon allowances under California's landmark greenhouse gas reduction law, Assembly Bill 32. Brown is hoping to create 20,000 new megawatts of renewable electricity by 2020, and he signed legislation requiring utilities to obtain one-third of their electricity from renewable sources by that year.

At a luncheon Wednesday hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce in Beijing, a businessman mentioned to Brown that his visit came "on a beautiful Beijing day where we see the blue sky, but that, in fact, is a rarity."

Brown told the audience that reducing China's reliance on fossil fuels would be difficult, but he suggested reducing air pollution is a matter of money and will.

"The fact of the matter is that could be cleaned up," Brown said. "I don't want to sound too flippant, but just spend a few billion – \$40 or \$50 billion – and you can clean it. It will take you a few years."

Yet even in California, a state relatively accommodating of environmental regulation, Brown has found progress on his environmental agenda toilsome. Developers of green energy projects complain of stringent permitting requirements and difficulty obtaining financing. Those concerns – and a broader objection from some business interests to environmental regulations they say are unduly burdensome – are present in China, as well.

"I don't think that the questions in China about climate change are very different than the questions in the U.S.," said Fredrich Kahrl, of the San Francisco-based consulting firm Energy and Environmental Economics Inc. "I think most people in China would be willing to grant that it's real and it's something that China as a country should be worried about. The question is about who does what."

Kahrl said Brown and the environmental officials traveling with him may be particularly well positioned to assist Chinese officials – particularly local ones – on environmental matters.

"A lot of people in senior-level positions are already sold that this is a good idea," Kahrl said. "But then, when it gets down to the actual bureaucrats and technocrats who have to do things, there's sort of an 'oh-shoot' moment, when no one really knows how to do it."

Brown had largely avoided lecturing the Chinese, instead praising the country for its advances on wind and battery technology.

"I'm looking very much forward to Chinese technology in battery improvement, because if the 80 or 100 companies in China keep making progress, California will have a million electric cars on the road in the next 10 to 12 years, and that will be a major step forward," Brown said at an event in Beijing on Wednesday. "Today is a time when we explore what is common, what we can do together. China plus California is bigger than the both separately."

In his speech today, Brown said it was remarkable he was even here – that it would have once been inconceivable for a California governor to talk openly about climate change in China. He read from the teachings of Confucius, the Chinese philosopher.

"To go unacknowledged by others without harboring frustration, is this not the mark of an accepting person?" Brown said. "Well, I've gone unacknowledged for a long time. I'm not frustrated, but I'm sure glad to be here this morning."

Turlock settles lawsuit over General Plan

By Marijke Rowland

Modesto Bee, Thursday, April 11, 2013

TURLOCK -- Turlock has settled a lawsuit brought by an environmental group over its General Plan.

The lawsuit, filed by the Davis-based California Clean Energy Committee in October, contended that the city's General Plan update adopted last fall did not comply with the California Environmental Quality Act and did not adequately protect farmland.

Turlock has agreed to pay \$15,000 in legal fees to California Clean Energy Committee head Eugene Wilson, who filed the lawsuit. The City Council also must consider a right-to-farm ordinance, as well as a measure to require developers to conduct energy-efficiency reviews.

In a 4-1 vote Tuesday night, the council approved the withdrawal of the \$15,000 required to pay the lawsuit. Councilwoman Amy Bublak was the dissenting vote.

In the settlement, the city agreed to pay \$3,000 a year for the next five years to the Turlock Farmers Market. The money must be used for agricultural marketing.

The Clean Energy Committee had registered its concern with the city's General Plan update last summer before it was passed. It presented the council with a multi-page list of concerns ranging from farmland conservation to greenhouse gas reduction, as well as a petition addressing the issues.

At the time, the city responded to the group's complaints but did not go as far as requested on agricultural land mitigation.

The General Plan update was passed by the council Sept. 25, with only Bublak dissenting at the time.

The California Environmental Quality Act was passed in 1970 and requires state and local agencies to identify the significant environmental impacts of their actions and avoid or mitigate them.

The lawsuit settlement wasn't the only item on the council's agenda Tuesday. Members unanimously approved the reimbursement of more than \$400,000 in park land fees to the developer of the yet-to-be developed Ten Pin Fun Center bowling alley. The fees were paid in 2005, but in 2010, the parcel was rezoned for nonresidential development and therefore no longer required to pay the fees.

Members unanimously passed an amended grant proposal to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District that could pay for eight new clean-energy vehicles for the Turlock police.

The grant application asks for about \$98,800 to pay for electric patrol scooters and hybrid electric cars. The money would fully fund four 2013 Trikke Tribred Patrol electric scooters and partially pay for four 2013 Ford Fusion plug-in hybrid cars.