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California Is Moving to Guide U.S. Policy on Pollution

By DANNY HAKIM

California has once again declared its intention to challenge the federal government for the lead in setting environmental policy in the United States.

If signed by Gov. Gray Davis, a Democrat, a bill given final approval in the Assembly on Monday night would require cuts in the tailpipe emissions of greenhouse gases by cars and light trucks. The law would be a major defeat for the auto industry in the nation's largest car market and a victory for a coalition of environmental groups and leading national Democrats.

The state's action would be the first significant regulatory prod the auto industry has faced since standards on gas mileage were raised in the 1980's. It follows a failed effort in March in the United States Senate to increase fuel standards, the latest in a string of measures defeated by Republicans and Democrats from Midwestern states.

The California legislation could alter what automobiles look like on the outside and under the hood over the next decade, and not just in California. The domestic auto industry fears that it could slow the huge growth in production of sport utility vehicles and pickups and put more pressure on General Motors and the Ford Motor Company to catch up to Toyota and Honda, which already make cars with hybrid engines that would help meet greenhouse gas standards. Toyota recently said it planned to have 300,000 hybrid vehicles on the road worldwide by the middle of the decade, putting its plans far ahead of those of the Big Three.

"This is rooted in the fact that California is the center of the environmental regulatory universe," said Christopher Preuss, a spokesman for General Motors, which opposed the legislation. "Whether it's feasible, reasonable or in the best interest of the citizens often takes a back seat to the environmental agenda."

Lawmakers around the country paid close attention to the legislation's progress. Two weeks ago, as the proposal appeared stalled, Senator John Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, sponsors of a failed proposal to raise federal fuel economy requirements, wrote California legislators, urging them to put aside the auto industry's arguments in considering the bill.