This month my mail has included a handful of very sad and frustrating reminders of what a heavy hit truth and integrity can take when oil profits come into play, and I’m not alone.

All over California, people are receiving very expensive-looking full-color, multi-page mailers and being subjected to radio spots announcing something called the California Gas Restriction Act of 2015. These turn out to be part of a massive and highly dishonest oil company campaign denouncing one of the best and most exciting bills that has been considered by the California legislature in a decade. The bill, SB 350 (De León-Leno), is actually titled the Clean Energy and Pollution Reduction Act of 2015 and what it actually does is increase California’s share of electricity from renewable sources to 50%, increase building energy efficiency 50%, and cut California’s use of oil in half through programs that enable a combination of new technologies, vehicle efficiency, and better planning.

But you wouldn’t have any idea of this from the oil company ad campaign—one of the most extreme examples of fossil fuel-interest misinformation I’ve ever seen. State voters are being bombarded with this deceptive information through a huge, multi-million dollar PR campaign that has nothing to do with the facts and everything to do with protecting oil company revenue, as the campaign is focused entirely on the petroleum use reduction provisions of the legislation.
An oil company front group
The ostensible source of this barrage is the “California Drivers Alliance” but the fine print reveals that the source is actually something called WSPA. For those of you who may not have heard, WSPA (pronounced “wiss-puh”) is the Western States Petroleum Association, the main oil industry lobbying arm in the western United States. The “California Driver’s Alliance” is one of their many well-documented astroturf groups that have been littering mailboxes and air waves in the western states for several years now with scare-tactics on how climate policies like cleaner fuels and vehicles are going to be the ruin of the economy.

Last year, for example, “California Drivers Alliance” had another campaign they called “Stop the Hidden Gas Tax”. Their 2014 pitch to state motorists was that on January 1st, 2015, when transportation fuels began to be subject to cap provisions of California’s climate law, gas prices would go up as much as 76 cents per gallon. They used this claim to try, unsuccessfully in the end, to persuade the Legislature to roll back implementation of the fuel carbon cap. In fact, January 1st came and went, fuels went under the cap, and gas prices actually went down, due to both too much supply and too little demand on a global level.

Well, now the oil industry’s “California Drivers Alliance” is back and on the warpath against SB 350. They have developed a new, and even more dishonest, set of claims and scare tactics to fight this legislation, claiming that the bill will give a state agency the authority to ration gas, restrict driving, impose fines on minivans, monitor driving habits, and other claims that have no basis in fact but are intended to stir up fear and paranoia. Clearly the goal is to make voters sufficiently alarmed by this hail of misleading and just plain false
information to pressure lawmakers to reject SB 350’s much-needed policies to reduce carbon pollution along with our use of price-volatile oil.

To be absolutely clear, the state does not have the authority to implement any of these “big brother” policies that WSPA is claiming, and SB 350 doesn’t give the state this authority—but that hasn’t stopped WSPA from making up their own “facts”, including a new title for the bill.

Reducing oil demand, lowering prices
The real impact of the Clean Energy and Pollution Reduction Act of 2015 will be to strengthen and accelerate clean transportation technologies and policies we already have: electric vehicles, low-carbon fuels, vehicle efficiency, and better transportation planning. These strategies have proven very successful in reducing our demand for oil and creating a suite of cleaner, money-saving vehicle and transportation options that reduce pollution, vehicle operating costs, and consumption of fossil fuels.

This is good for both public health and people’s pocketbooks—UCS research has already shown how these policies are saving consumers money now and will save more in the future. At the same time, gasoline demand has been fairly flat over the past decade and is projected to go down over the next decade, in large part thanks to the combination of clean transportation measures we have in place that would be increased and accelerated under SB 350. Lowering demand will create more downward pressure on gasoline prices. No wonder the oil industry is resorting to a no-holds-barred strategy—these policies are costing them real money!

So, in the end, the simple truth that explains all of WSPA’s lies about SB 350 is that the legislation, while good for people, is bad for oil companies.

The WSPA campaign is very aggressive, and some lawmakers are getting nervous. We need to fight back, and hard. We need to let our lawmakers know that we are not fooled by WSPA’s lies, and that we want them to support the public’s interest, not oil company interests. Make your voice heard. If you are a California voter, please look up your state Assembly member’s phone number at this website, and then call their offices to say that you support SB 350 and SB 32 because it will be a critical law to reduce carbon pollution dramatically over the next decades. Let them know that you want them to support what’s good for the people of California, and reject WSPA lies.

Posted in: Biofuel, Fossil Fuels, Global Warming Tags: astroturf groups, California drivers, clean fuels, clean vehicles, climate-change, fossil fuel companies, gas prices, Oil, oil companies, SB 350

About the author: Adrienne Alvord is UCS’s California and Western states director working to ensure a clean, de-carbonized energy and fuels economy that promotes equitable economic growth and improves public health in western states. See Adrienne’s full bio.

Support from UCS members make work like this possible. Will you join us? Help UCS advance independent science for a healthy environment and a safer world.
Comment Policy

UCS welcomes comments that foster civil conversation and debate. To help maintain a healthy, respectful discussion, please focus comments on the issues, topics, and facts at hand, and refrain from personal attacks. Posts that are commercial, obscene, rude or disruptive will be removed.

Please note that comments are open for two weeks following each blog post. When commenting, you must use your real name. Valid email addresses are required. (UCS respects your privacy; we will not display, lend, or sell your email address for any reason.)