

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OTHER VIEWS

Clean Fuels Program or Baby BETC?

The Bend Bulletin

The Secretary of State’s Office recently released a summary of lessons learned from Oregon’s disastrous Business Energy Tax Credit (BETC) program. Thanks to a combination of lax oversight, complex and easily manipulated rules, even illegal activity, the well-intended environmental effort cost taxpayers millions upon millions of dollars before the Legislature finally pulled the plug on it.

One lesson lawmakers and state officials have yet to learn, unfortunately, involves the importance of transparency in ensuring accountability. Given the central role the state’s newspapers played in exposing some of the BETC program’s worst abuses, you’d think lawmakers would make similar programs easy for reporters, or any member of the public, to scrutinize. Sunshine, as they say, is a powerful disinfectant.

Instead, the state on Oct. 18 refused to share crucial information about a relatively new, expensive and even more complex state program. Call it Baby BETC.

Better known as the Clean Fuels Program, Baby BETC is designed to reduce the “carbon intensity” of Oregon’s motor fuels by 10 percent between 2015 and 2025. Lawmakers passed the underlying

legislation back in 2009, but the program wasn’t fully implemented until the beginning of 2016 thanks in large part to its bewildering complexity.

Carbon intensity, the heart of the program, is a measure not only of the global-warming gases produced by a fuel’s consumption, but also of those released during its production, transportation and storage. Thus, two gallons of gasoline, ethanol or whatever may have different carbon intensities depending upon their heritage.

The law gradually reduces the acceptable carbon intensity of road fuels. As it does, importers of the fossil fuels most of us put in our cars and trucks will find themselves increasingly on the wrong side of the state’s global warming ledger. To maintain compliance with the clean fuels law, they’ll have to buy more and more credits generated by businesses and other entities that produce and sell low-carbon fuels, most notably electricity. The cost of buying the credits is passed along at the pump.

This is, of course, a gas and diesel tax by another name. Instead of using the proceeds to pay for roads, though, Baby BETC transfers the money to low carbon-fuels industries and other “credit generators,” including public transit districts and even state agencies such as the

Department of Administrative Services.

Since 2016, more than \$17 million worth of credits have been sold through the fuels program, which means that Oregon’s gas and diesel users have overpaid a like amount at the pump in order to subsidize low-carbon fuels. The state Department of Environmental Quality’s website features a rolling tally of credits sold, and for what price.

What it doesn’t tell you, importantly, is which companies bought the credits, and in what amount, and which sold them, thereby hoovering up a sizable government subsidy. When we asked DEQ to provide that missing information, the department refused, arguing that the information is exempt from public disclosure. The reason for the secrecy? Telling taxpayers whom they’re subsidizing and to what degree might reveal “trade secrets” of the entities involved.

Let’s get this straight. Oregon’s BETC program scandalously distributed millions of public dollars by means of a complex and laxly managed credit scheme. Now, Baby BETC is distributing millions of dollars by means of a complex credit scheme whose workings are deliberately hidden from the public. What could go wrong?

Particularly absurd is the application of trade-secrets protection to government

entities that might be selling clean-fuels credits. How on earth can public bodies, which are supposed to operate in the open, hide their wheeling and dealing with taxpayer money as a “trade secret?” Dana Huddleston, DEQ’s public record requests coordinator, said she didn’t know. We wish we could say we were surprised.

Did lawmakers really intend the law to prohibit the sharing of this information, as DEQ officials claim?

That’s a question legislators should answer during next year’s session. If lawmakers value transparency, as they should, they should amend the law to require the sharing of complete credit-transaction information. In fact, they should insist that such information be posted on DEQ’s website in an easy-to-use fashion.

If, on the other hand, lawmakers do intend to hide subsidy transactions completely from the people providing the subsidies, they should have the courage to say so. They also should explain to taxpayers why Oregon, especially in the wake of the BETC disaster, should tolerate a subsidy scheme whose operation requires secrecy.

It will be useful to have their views on the record if Baby BETC grows up to resemble Big BETC, as history suggests that it will.

OTHER VIEWS

Khashoggi’s death should recalibrate Saudi relations

Washington Post

The murder of Jamal Khashoggi should spark a long-overdue recalibration of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and its reckless de facto leader, Mohammed bin Salman. In the past several years the crown prince has launched a series of foolhardy foreign policy initiatives that have damaged U.S. interests, including his rupturing of relations with Qatar and Canada and the kidnapping of the pro-American Lebanese prime minister. But the best place to start the U.S. readjustment is where Mohammed bin Salman himself began: with the disastrous war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia and its allies plowed into Yemen in 2015, after a northern rebel group, the Houthis, captured the capital and ousted a Saudi-backed government. Saudi officials confidently promised to make quick work of the Houthis. After more than three years of fighting, including a U.S.-backed bombing campaign that has killed thousands of civilians, the Saudi coalition, which includes the United Arab Emirates, has come nowhere near to achieving that objective.

Instead it has triggered what the United Nations describes as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis while committing atrocities that a U.N. investigative panel said were probable war crimes. Eight million Yemenis are in danger of starvation, and more than 1 million have contracted cholera — the worst such epidemic in

modern history. Yet UAE forces, ignoring U.N. appeals, are besieging the port through which 70 percent of food and medicine supplies are imported. The Saudis keep dropping U.S.-supplied bombs on civilian targets: On Aug. 9, one struck a school bus, killing at least 51 people, including 40 children.

The Saudis say they are countering Iran, which backs the Houthis. But the Houthis are an indigenous group with legitimate grievances, and the war has only enhanced Iranian influence. As has been obvious for some time, the only solution is a negotiated settlement. But the Saudis have done their best to sabotage a U.N.-led peace process.

Talks planned for Geneva in September failed when Saudi leaders would not grant safe travel guarantees to Houthi leaders.

Congressional concern about this strategic and humanitarian disaster has been mounting. In March, the Senate nearly approved a resolution cutting off U.S. aid, including refueling and targeting assistance. In August, Congress approved a defense bill that required the administration to certify that the Saudis were taking steps to minimize humanitarian casualties and facilitate humanitarian deliveries. Against overwhelming evidence to the contrary and the advice of State Department experts, the administration issued the certification last month.

Mr. Khashoggi’s death should resurface the issue, as senators from both parties are proposing. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) has been holding up a Saudi request to purchase precision-guided munition kits for its bombs; that blockage should be formalized, along with a ban on all other aid to the Yemen war.

Iran hawks will howl that the prohibition will work to Tehran’s advantage. But the Trump administration’s unquestioning support for what amounts to a sectarian crusade by Sunni Saudi Arabia against Shiite Iran needs an adjustment, too. Iran’s attempt to establish itself as a regional hegemon should be resisted. But that can be achieved without buying into Mohammed bin Salman’s own imperial — and unachievable — ambitions.



YOUR VIEWS

Hard to differentiate Trump, Walden

Trump believes that employers should be able to offer time off work instead of pay for overtime; so does Walden. Trump believes in lifting stream protection rules; so does Walden. Trump believes in lifting rules barring the FCC from sharing data on customers activities; so does Walden. Trump believes in repealing a rule requiring federal contractors to report labor violations; so does Walden. Preexisting conditions? Cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security to pay for a tax cut for millionaires and billionaires? The list goes on and on.

If we have a congressman representing our district who is in lock step with a president who doesn’t have the capacity for compassion and or decency, how are we supposed to differentiate between the two? Trump was the result of laziness and complacency on the part of the electorate. The one thing both Republican and Democrat constituents agree on is term limits. Walden has run his course; the price for his lethargic representation

of this district should be the end of his “representation” on our behalf.

Join me in voting for Jamie McLeod-Skinner this November.

David Gracia
Hermiston

Attacks against Walden, Republicans unfair

Recently I attended the 2nd Congressional District Democratic candidate Jamie McLeod-Skinner’s public forum in Condon, well attended by local citizens. She is a very engaging speaker that skillfully portrays the new Democratic party’s very liberal agenda. The meeting was informative, with several subjects discussed with respect from both sides of an issue.

I attended a similar meeting last fall at Arlington to hear Republican congressman Greg Walden speak. What a contrast! Local citizens were soon outnumbered by about 20 folks from the Hood River area and more from as far south as Medford. These activists were not there to hear Congressman Walden speak, but

to harass, interrupt and jam a bunch of cameras in his face with their sticks. These were organized activist attacks that have followed Walden’s meetings throughout the state this spring. *The Dalles Chronicle* reported that about 500 people attended his meeting in The Dalles last spring. I guess they “just happened” to be in The Dalles that day.

This is the new mantra of the Democratic Party. Activists don’t let a conservative speaker present their message, attack them verbally, and at times, physically. Few conservatives are permitted to speak on college campuses, and when they do appear, they are shouted down and campus facilities may be trashed.

I have never seen any TV coverage showing this outrageous attack on Walden. In contrast, we see the TV coverage reporting 24-7 anything real or often unsubstantiated allegations or anything negative on President Trump. I would suggest tuning in to Fox News network for at least an hour a day — it might be informative to contrast Fox’s news with what the other networks cover.

It saddens me to see the Democratic

Party’s extreme swing to the left, and seemingly condoning the mob mentality and anything goes to promote their cause.

Rep. Walden has served his district’s residents well in the past and would continue to do so in the future.

Larry Snyder
Condon

Murdock understands agriculture

Agriculture is the driving force of the Umatilla County economy. As a major land owner, farmer and rancher, George Murdock is well-versed in what county government can do to facilitate the needs of our producers. An example of this was the difficult decision in hot weather to allow field burning for the week before Round-Up, which was beneficial to a number of producers who utilize that tool.

We are well satisfied with the current direction of county government, which George has helped form. We need him for another term.

Dr. and Mrs. John Groupe
Pendleton

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