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EDITORIALS

Air board's shame

It won't review work of discredited scientist

For years, critics joked that the White House of George W. Bush was encased in a massive bubble that kept out all discomfiting information. Now that Bush has exited, this bubble has found a new home at 1001 I Street in Sacramento, headquarters of the California Air Resources Board.

No matter what is happening with the economy, no matter how reasonable are the pleas from affected businesses, no matter if even the respected Legislative Analyst's Office raises concerns, nothing will deter the air board from its central mission: implementing two very costly regulatory schemes adopted in December.

One would impose unique costs on California by forcing the use of cleaner but much costlier fuels; another would impose unique cost on California by adopting much stricter rules on diesel emissions.

Now it appears the air board's single-mindedness will lead it to defy convention in dealing with an internal scandal related to the diesel rules. The board admitted this week what this page reported in December: Hien Tran, the lead

scientist on the study justifying the rules, did not have a Ph.D. in statistics from the University of California Davis as he claimed.

Board officials said, however, that Tran did provide them a Ph.D. from Thornhill University. But by all appearances, Thornhill is a "distance learning" diploma mill with branches in New York and London.

The board is apparently considering disciplining Tran. However, it has declined to hire independent experts to examine his work on the diesel study, as scientific ethicists recommend. Not only that, it refuses to subject Tran's work to a fresh internal review.

This is not how a reputable body should behave, especially when it maintains that its decisions are built on a bedrock of scientific integrity. Instead, it is the behavior of an agency driven by external influences — namely, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's determination to be remembered as an environmental pioneer.

If that requires the California Air Resources Board to rely on the work of a man touting a degree from a diploma mill, so be it. Many adjectives come to mind. We offer one: shameful.