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Speaker's Carbon Credits Fill Assembly's Stockings

Anti-warming gifts kindle a moment of bipartisan warmth

By Shane Goldmacher

Santa – in the guise of Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez – arrived early at the Capitol this week bearing gifts for every member of the Assembly.

No, not lumps of coal.

In fact, every member of the lower house received the "anti-coal" – 3 metric tons of carbon offset credits.

"It will help our economy harness green technologies as effectively as Santa harnesses reindeer to his sleigh," the Los Angeles Democrat wrote in the zippy letter that accompanied the framed certificates.

The unique holiday gift brought a mixture of laughs, guffaws and cheers from both sides of the aisle.

"I've received enough fruitcakes in my life," said Assemblyman Greg Aghazarian, a Stockton Republican. "This is probably the most creative holiday gift I've got this year."

"It's the thought that counts," Aghazarian added, noting Núñez's signature legislation, a 2006 law

that capped greenhouse gas emissions in California. "From the speaker's point of view, this is a great, thoughtful gift."

Of course, Aghazarian – and all but one of his GOP Assembly colleagues – voted against that bill.

Traditionally, Núñez has handed out a bottle of wine costing roughly \$100 to his fellow lawmakers. But "instead of the usual bottle of wine, I'd like to start a new tradition," Núñez wrote in the letter.

The timing for that new tradition works out well for the speaker, who endured a flap this fall over lavish campaign spending, including \$5,149 given to a wine merchant in Bordeaux. Núñez pointed out in his gift note, "Even a small rise in global warming could wipe out Napa Valley pinot noir and chardonnay entirely!"

Like the wine of yore, Núñez's campaign also purchased the carbon credits.

"It's cute, it's thoughtful, it's creative," said Assemblyman Jared Huffman, a San Rafael

Democrat. "Yeah, much better than a bottle of wine, much better than just about anything I can imagine getting from a colleague."

And it's not too expensive, either.

Connie Best, managing director of the San Francisco-based Pacific Forest Trust, where Núñez bought the carbon credits, said the price varies depending on quantity purchased, but it usually runs about \$15 per metric ton.

The idea, in essence, is selling trees' ability to soak up the carbon dioxide released when humans burn fossil fuels. The Pacific Forest Trust manages the carbon-absorbing Van Eck Forest in Humboldt County.

The 3 tons per member that the speaker bought are the equivalent of flying 6,000 miles in an airplane, driving 18,000 miles in a hybrid or running an average household for six months, according to Núñez's letter.

Some national vendors, such as TerraPass, offer carbon credit gift certificates. But before you try to buy carbon credits from Pacific Forest Trust

as part of your last-minute Christmas shopping blitz, Best warns they're not publicly for sale.

"We're not really set up to do that," she said, though it is a goal for 2008. "We don't have operators waiting by the phone for your call." But, she said, "When the speaker called, it's hard to not be as responsive as possible."

He wasn't the first California politician to come calling. Others who have bought carbon credits in the Van Eck Forest include House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The forest is registered with the California Climate Action Registry.

Not everyone loved Núñez's gift of credits. Assemblyman Doug La Malfa, an Oroville Republican, called the credits an "ironic" gift to Republicans who have criticized Democrats' attempt to rein in global warming.

"I put it on the mantle right above my fireplace," he said dryly, "so that when I'm basking in the warmth of my burning Christmas tree at the end of the season, I can also bask in the warmth of carbon credits."