

Not enough or too far? California climate plan pleases few

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Electric cars are parked at a charging station in Sacramento, Calif., Wednesday, April 13, 2022. California air regulators will take public comment Thursday, June 23 2022, on a plan to slash fossil fuel use and reach carbon neutrality by 2045. Credit: AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File

Heat waves and drought gripping California highlight the urgency to

slash fossil fuel use and remove planet-warming emissions from the air, a top state official said Thursday during discussions of a new plan for the state to reach its climate goals.

"I think every single Californian today knows that we're living through a climate emergency," said Jared Blumenfeld, secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency.

He spoke as the California Air Resources Board opened a hearing on a plan for the nation's most populous state to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045. That means the state would remove as much carbon from the air as it emits. The timeline is among the most ambitious in the nation and in the world, but few who offered public comment were happy with the state's plan for reaching that milestone.

Environmental groups, academics, and people who live in heavily polluted neighborhoods said the plan doesn't do enough to reduce the production or use of fossil fuels. Some business, industry and labor groups, meanwhile, said the transition could raise prices and hurt workers.

"How we achieve our climate goals matters as much as when we achieve them, and we need a plan for real zero, not net zero," said Catherine Garoupa White, a member of the plan's Environmental Justice Advisory Committee and executive director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition.

The air board members will hold their own discussion of the plan on Friday. The 14-member board is made up of political appointees with backgrounds on local air boards, the transportation sector, environmental justice communities and agriculture.

California is often touted as a leader on U.S. climate policy and it has set

some of the most aggressive rules for regulating vehicle emissions. The size of the California's economy—it's bigger than those of most nations—means the state's climate policies can often drive major business changes. It's 2045 carbon neutrality goal is matched only by Hawaii among states, and tracks with goals set by other major economies like Germany.



Gen Nashimoto, of Luminalt, installs solar panels in Hayward, Calif., on Wednesday, April 29, 2020. California air regulators will take public comment Thursday, June 23, 2022, on a plan to slash fossil fuel use and reach carbon neutrality by 2045. Credit: AP Photo/Ben Margot, File

The state would reach its goal through combination of lowering fossil fuel use and using technology to remove any remaining emissions from

the air. Board staff estimates it would reduce petroleum demand across the economy and the use of fossil natural gas in buildings by 91% by 2045.

Doing so would require 30 times as many electric vehicles on the road compared to today, six times more electric appliances in homes, four times more wind and solar generation and 60 times more hydrogen.

Such a sweeping transition would lower the state's emissions about 78% come 2045. Some observers note that Washington and New York, both Democratic-led states, have more ambitious targets for direct emissions reductions, 95% and 85% respectively, though the proposals don't offer perfect comparisons.

Critics from environmental groups say California's plan doesn't call for deep enough emissions cuts and relies too heavily on unproven and energy intensive carbon capture and removal. The concerns about such technology track with global concerns about the best way to tackle emissions goals.

The meeting grew tense in the mid-afternoon as environmental justice advocates who had been rallying outside walked into the hearing room and began singing and chanting over a speaker representing business interests. The air board briefly paused the meeting as chants protesting the use of fossil fuels continued.

The environmental advocates said they felt business and fossil fuel representatives were given more favorable speaking slots.

"There are not two sides to this issue," said Ari Eisenstadt, campaign manager for Regenerate California, an effort to transition away from fossil fuels.



A person walks past pump jacks operating at the Kern River Oil Field in Bakersfield, Calif., on Jan. 16, 2015. California air regulators will take public comment Thursday, June 23, 2022, on a plan to slash fossil fuel use and reach carbon neutrality by 2045. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File

George Peppas, president of a chamber of commerce group south of Los Angeles, criticized the board for allowing the interruption. He said the plan's shift away from gas-powered cars will lower gas tax revenue that's critical to maintaining roads and that electric cars will be too expensive for many people to afford.

The plan expects electricity demand to shoot up by 68% as more people drive electric cars and get rid of gas-powered stoves and other home

appliances.

Some environmental justice advocates said electric cars may be out of reach for many people, but the answer should be a greater investment in public transit instead. Disadvantaged neighborhoods often bear the brunt of fossil fuel pollution.

"We need clean air and dependable mass transit," said Karla Monsivais, a resident of San Diego's Barrio Logan neighborhood.

California's proposal relies on removing 80 million metric tons of carbon dioxide from the air in 2045. That amount of removal represents the "highest risk scenario" for meeting the state's climate goals, according to an October 2020 analysis by Environmental + Energy Economics, an outside consulting firm hired by the air board to model various proposals.

Right now, carbon capture is not in widespread use, though the Biden administration is spending billions to ramp it up. Some speakers were supportive of the plan's reliance on the technology.

"Deep decarbonization depends on a lot of options," said Alex Kizer, senior vice president of research and analysis at Energy Futures Initiative, a group led by former U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz. "We see (carbon capture and sequestration) as one of the most valuable decarbonization solutions for the country and especially for the state."

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