

Editorial: How bad the climate crisis gets is still up to us—we just have to act

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As usual, California was ahead of the game.

It's been two decades since lawmakers passed the first law to begin

requiring [electric utilities](#) to replace fossil fuels with [renewable energy](#). Nearly as long since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called for 1 million solar roofs. A decade since the state first mandated large numbers of electric cars on the road, and four years since Berkeley became the first U.S. city to ban gas appliances in new homes.

None of those initiatives have protected the Golden State from the ravages of the climate crisis.

The eight largest wildfires on record have all burned in the last six years, collectively torching more than 4 million acres—and none of them was nearly as deadly as the 2018 Camp fire, which killed 85 people and destroyed the town of Paradise.

The three driest years ever recorded came to a dramatic end this past winter, when record rain and snow wreaked deadly havoc, flooding farmworker communities and burying mountain towns. The precipitation filled reservoirs but did nothing to change the reality that California faces a frighteningly water-scarce future as rivers dwindle and groundwater levels drop.

The coast has fared relatively better—but sea level rise grows ever more urgent. Cliffs are collapsing into the Pacific, rail lines are experiencing temporary shutdowns and waves are edging closer to toxic sites, threatening to poison nearby residents.

And there may be no more harmful consequences of global warming than [extreme heat](#). Hundreds of Californians already die in [heat waves](#) every year, roasting in their homes and baking on asphalt streets with little shade. The toll will only rise as we continue to burn coal, oil and fossil gas, spewing heat-trapping carbon dioxide and methane pollution into the atmosphere.

Lisa Patel, a Stanford University pediatrician, saw the dangers firsthand during last year's Labor Day weekend heat wave, when temperatures reached 116 degrees outside her hospital in Pleasanton. She worked two 24-hour shifts, and she was called to several deliveries where laboring mothers had fevers or other complications. She sent multiple newborns to intensive care.

"In retrospect, I don't know if those moms had a true infection or if they just got overheated," Patel said.

It's not too late to stop climate change from getting worse.

But for California to lead the world toward a safer future, the state's politicians, [business leaders](#) and tens of millions of residents will need to work a lot harder—and be willing to accept a tomorrow that looks different than today.

Los Angeles offers a telling case study.

The city is dominated by freeways built to serve gas-guzzling cars and trucks, and for decades its biggest electricity source has been a coal-fired plant in Utah. Ships and trucks belch toxic fumes into low-income communities of color. Many neighborhoods have precious few trees to protect residents from heat soaked up by the urban hardscape. There are too many grassy lawns, not enough protected bus lanes and far too many well-to-do white homeowners willing to fight dense housing construction near job centers.

Elected officials are trying, at least, to make things better.

L.A.'s first-ever chief heat officer, Marta Segura, is working on efforts to plant trees, update building codes to keep residents cool and create an early-warning system for dangerous temperature extremes, with [public](#)

[outreach](#) in English and Spanish. The port is aiming for a 100% zero-emissions truck fleet by 2035. City leaders have approved rebates for replacing grass with artificial turf or native plants, plus billions of dollars in spending to expand the Metro rail system ahead of the 2028 Summer Olympics.

And that Utah coal plant? It won't be around much longer. The L.A. Department of Water and Power has an ambitious plan to fuel the city with 100% climate-friendly energy by 2035, largely by using solar farms, wind turbines and lithium-ion batteries.

"This is a new direction—it's kind of a new world order," said Marty Adams, general manager of the Department of Water and Power. "We're learning as quickly as we can, but there are a lot of things that are kind of like ground zero."

None of it is enough. But at the same time, we've reached a point in history when almost nothing is enough.

Earth is likely headed beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming—the goal urged by scientists and endorsed by nearly every nation at the 2015 Paris climate summit. Keeping average global temperature increases below that target would require slashing carbon pollution nearly in half by 2030—not impossible, but nowhere close to current economic and political trends.

The 1.2 degrees of warming we've already felt have brought plenty of pain and suffering, especially for Black, Latino and Native American communities and nations in the Global South. Every additional tenth of a degree of warming will bring even more pain and suffering—and every tenth of a degree we avoid will mean better lives for billions of people.

So what more can California do to get its own house in order and

possibly bring other states and countries along for the ride?

For one thing, California can prove it's possible to phase out fossil fuels without badly disrupting daily life.

Hundreds of thousands of households and businesses got a taste of the difficulties in summer 2020, when state officials were forced to implement brief rolling blackouts during a brutal heat wave. There simply wasn't enough power to supply tens of millions of air conditioners after sundown, when temperatures remained high but solar panels stopped producing electricity.

Residents barely avoided more outages the next two summers—and only then because they heeded pleas to use less power.

"We all want to accelerate the elimination of the gas," Gov. Gavin Newsom said during a September 2022 heat storm. But the fact that gas-fired power plants still provide much of the state's on-demand power is "a sober reminder of reality."

Newsom has made climate and clean energy top priorities, likely knowing any future presidential campaign could flourish or fail on his performance. Like many leaders in Washington, D.C., the governor has urged permitting reform to make it easier to build the massive number of renewable energy facilities the state will need to ditch fossil fuels. He has also led a push to keep California's Diablo Canyon nuclear plant open past 2025, so that it can keep generating emissions-free electricity.

There are many actions regular Californians can take to push the state forward, too: installing rooftop solar panels, replacing gas furnaces with electric heat pumps and gasoline cars with electric models and hardening their homes against wildfire.

Golden State residents can also think more broadly about how their lifestyles line up with climate imperatives.

Do you have an opportunity to take public transit to work, or to work from home? Would you support devoting more space on your neighborhood's streets to buses and bikes, even if it slows down your car-based commute? Do you really want to move from a city to a rural or suburban area surrounded by forests when there's a decent chance flames will come for your home?

Of course, living more sustainably would be easier with support from politicians and business executives—cheaper housing within cities, better bus and rail options, corporate policies that don't require employees to drive to faraway offices.

"There is no more important issue for the world," said Mike Feuer, formerly L.A.'s city attorney, during an unsuccessful campaign for mayor last year. "If we were to look forward to a conversation that our kids or grandkids might have in 20 or 30 years, they're going to look back on us and say, 'What the heck were you thinking?'"

No matter how hard California's 40 million residents might work to reduce their own emissions, there's nothing more effective they can do to fight climate change than to put pressure on elected officials to take more sweeping action.

That action should begin with aggressive measures to confront the fossil fuel industry, many activists say.

Under a bill pending in the state Legislature this year, California's two big public employee pension funds—the nation's largest—would be required to divest billions of dollars from oil and gas companies. Other proposals would require major corporations of all kinds to publicly

report their heat-trapping emissions, as well as the risks that [climate change](#) poses to their operations.

But at least thus far, the deep-pocketed fossil fuel industry has largely been able to stave off transformative change.

Pumpjacks continue to suck oil and gas from the ground in and around Los Angeles, Kern County and elsewhere—polluting the air and contributing to asthma, preterm births and reduced lung function. Lawmakers voted last year to ban new drilling within 3,200 feet of homes, but the ban would do nothing to address existing wells—and it may never take effect. It's paused through at least November 2024 after oil and gas producers secured enough signatures to send it to the ballot for voters to decide.

Another bill that would have made fossil fuel companies financially liable for the health problems of people living near wells died a quiet death in the Legislature in May, when a powerful lawmaker blocked the legislation from even getting a full vote.

"Fossil fuel executives have known for decades that drilling in neighborhoods puts our communities at risk," said Nicole Rivera, government affairs director at the Climate Center, a Santa Rosa-based nonprofit, after the bill was defeated. "Instead of acting to protect public health and our shared climate, they've lobbied and spent millions of dollars convincing elected officials to look the other way."

The political sparring over gas furnaces, water heaters and stoves has been equally intense.

Berkeley's 2019 ban on gas hookups in new homes and businesses spurred a nationwide trend, with dozens of cities across the U.S. following its lead—including Los Angeles. The fossil fuel industry

pushed back hard, led by the nation's largest natural gas utility, Southern California Gas Co. A recent court ruling called into question the legality of some of the bans.

Will Californians be willing to give up cooking with gas? Will they support cutting down on fossil fuel production, even if doing so means higher prices at the pump? Can they learn to embrace a future of more densely populated, less car-centric cities?

And equally important: Will they vote for politicians determined to stand up to one of the world's most powerful industries?

Because at the end of the day, the main barriers to climate action are more political than anything. Studies have shown we have most of the technologies we need to stop burning [fossil fuels](#). The costs of clean energy have fallen dramatically. We know how to redesign our cities—and reshape our patterns of development—to get carbon pollution mostly under control.

The climate crisis is here to stay. How bad it gets is still up to us.

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