

California Plans to Ban Sales of New Gas-Powered Cars in 15 Years

The proposal would speed up the state's efforts to fight global warming at a time when California is being battered by wildfires, heat waves and other consequences of climate change.



By Brad Plumer and Jill Cowan

Sept. 23, 2020

California plans to ban the sale of new gasoline-powered cars statewide by 2035, Gov. Gavin Newsom said Wednesday, in a sweeping move aimed at accelerating the state's efforts to combat global warming amid a deadly and record-breaking wildfire season.

In an executive order, Governor Newsom directed California's regulators to develop a plan that would require automakers to sell steadily more zero-emissions passenger vehicles in the state, such as battery-powered or hydrogen-powered cars and pickup trucks, until they make up 100 percent of new auto sales in just 15 years.

The plan would also set a goal for all heavy-duty trucks on the road in California to be zero emissions by 2045 where possible. And the order directs the state's transportation agencies to look for near-term actions to reduce Californian's reliance on driving by, for example, expanding access to mass transit and biking.

"This is the next big global industry," Governor Newsom said at a news conference on Wednesday, referring to clean-energy technologies such as electric vehicles. "And California wants to dominate it."

California has long cast itself as a global leader on climate-change policy, having already passed a law to get 100 percent of its electricity from wind, solar and other sources that don't produce carbon dioxide by 2045. But in recent weeks, as the state has been scorched by record wildfires partly driven by rising temperatures, Governor Newsom has found himself pressured to act even faster.

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Ramping up sales of emissions-free vehicles in California will be an enormous challenge over a relatively short period of time, experts said. Last year, only 8 percent of the nearly two million passenger vehicles sold statewide were battery-electric or plug-in hybrid vehicles. Transportation remains California's largest source of planet-warming emissions, accounting for roughly 40 percent of the state's greenhouse gases from human activity.

"We have a strategy to be as bold as the problem is big, to recognize that we have agency," Governor Newsom said at the news conference, where he stood before a glittering half circle of electric cars. "We're not just victims of fate."

In addition to setting new standards for automakers in the state, California will also likely need to increase financial incentives for people to afford electric vehicles and significantly expand its charging infrastructure, said Don Anair, deputy director of the clean vehicles program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, an advocacy group.

"It's feasible, but it's going to take California pulling all the levers at its disposal," Mr. Anair said.

The order would affect only new-vehicle sales, the governor's office said. It would not prevent Californians from owning cars with internal combustion engines past 2035 or selling them on the used-vehicle market.

The Alliance for Automotive Innovation, a trade group that represents most of the nation's automakers, said it welcomed efforts to expand the electric-vehicle market in California, but questioned whether a ban on internal combustion engines was the best way to achieve that goal.

"Neither mandates nor bans build successful markets," said John Bozzella, the alliance's chief executive, in a statement. "Much more needs to be done to increase consumer demand for Zero Emission Vehicles in order for California to reach its goals. It will require increased infrastructure, incentives, fleet requirements, building codes, and much more."

The new executive order would build on California's existing vehicle policies. State regulators have already set a goal of putting five million zero-emissions vehicles on the road by 2030. In June, the state adopted a major rule requiring more than half of all trucks sold in the state to be zero-emissions by 2035. And regulators are currently working on a rule that could require ride-hailing companies like Lyft and Uber to shift to electric vehicles.

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Today's step would go much further. Although 15 countries have already announced plans to phase out sales of vehicles with internal combustion engines in the coming decades — including Britain, Denmark and Norway — California would be the first jurisdiction in the United States to do so.

Environmental groups had mixed reactions to Governor Newsom's announcement. While they applauded the new goal for zero-emission vehicles, they noted that California remained one of the country's largest oil and gas producers, particularly as energy companies have used hydraulic fracturing to unlock new fossil-fuel reserves in recent years.

"Setting a timeline to eliminate petroleum vehicles is a big step, but Newsom's announcement provided rhetoric rather than real action on the other critical half of the climate problem — California's dirty oil production," said Kassie Siegel, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute.

"Newsom can't claim climate leadership while handing out permits to oil companies to drill and frack," Ms. Siegel said.

In his news conference, Governor Newsom said he lacked the authority to ban oil and gas drilling in the state on his own. His executive order sets a goal of ending new permits for hydraulic fracturing by 2024, and he said he would work with California's legislature to set rules that would better protect vulnerable communities from nearby fossil-fuel extraction and help the state's energy industry transition away from oil and gas.

"None of us are naïve. California is a fossil fuel state," he said. "We need to focus on a just transition."

The oil and gas industry reacted sharply to the order.

"Let's be clear: Today's announcement to curb in-state production of energy will put thousands of workers in the Central Valley, Los Angeles basin, and Central Coast on the state's overloaded unemployment program, drive up energy costs when consumers can least afford it, and hurt California's fight to lower global greenhouse gas emissions," said Rock Zierman, chief executive of the California Independent Petroleum Association.

Asked why he was moving forward with the electric car mandate by executive order rather than asking the legislature to approve it, Governor Newsom cited the example of the state's new rule requiring all trucks sold in California to be zero-emissions by 2045, which was rolled out by the state's clean air regulator, the California Air

Resources Board.

“This moment demands leadership, it demands movement,” Governor Newsom said, adding that the truck rule is now being replicated in other states.

In theory, a future California governor could try to undo Mr. Newsom’s rules, though legal experts said it would be difficult. “Executive orders can always be undone by future governors,” said Cara Horowitz, co-director of the Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at U.C.L.A. Law School. “But once this reaches the regulatory stage, it’s a lot stickier.”

There is one key complication in California’s move: The Trump administration has challenged the state’s authority to set its own pollution standards for cars and trucks as part of its rollback of Obama-era vehicle efficiency rules. California has defended its authority to set its own stricter rules under the 1970 Clean Air Act, but that dispute has yet to be settled by the courts.

Mary Nichols, the chairwoman of the California Air Resources Board, said on Wednesday that she expected the state to be taken to court over the regulations. “We’ll get there eventually,” she said.