



Could California's future have far fewer gasoline-powered vehicles and many more electric vehicles and charging stations? (Toby Talbot / Associated Press)

Boiling Point: No more gas-powered cars? Why California's shift to zero-emission vehicles is 'huge'

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Good morning. I'm Tony Barboza, and I'm filling in for Sammy Roth, who has been on vacation and will be back next week.

Living in Southern California, I spend a lot of time on the freeway behind the wheel of my Subaru Impreza — or at least I did before the pandemic. As I watch the miles tick upward on my odometer, I've also felt guilty about the pollution my white sedan is spewing into the air.

Now I'm thinking it could be the last gas-powered car I own.

That's because of [an executive order](#) Gov. Gavin Newsom issued last week to require that all new passenger vehicles sold in California be zero-emission by 2035. The announcement

came after a summer in which California experienced record-shattering heat waves and wildfires and weeks of horribly smoky air, which motivated Newsom to pledge "[giant leaps forward](#)" in fighting climate change.

Phasing out gas-fueled vehicles is a huge shift for the nation's car capital. It's also a logical next step for a state that has long struggled with air pollution, and increasingly, the effects of global warming.

For perspective, I called Julie Cerqueira, executive director of the U.S. Climate Alliance, a coalition of 25 states that are working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and advance the goals of the international Paris climate accord,

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which President Trump has disavowed. Cerqueira previously worked in the U.S. State Department, from 2014 to 2017, as a senior advisor to the special envoy for climate change. Our conversation has been edited and condensed.

How does this 15-year timeline fit into the Paris accord and its goal to keep the global rise in temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius?

What's really important about this announcement is that the transportation sector continues to be our largest source of greenhouse gases in the United States. And despite many of the regulations and incentives that are out there, we are really failing to adequately address transportation emissions. The science has been telling us we really only have 10, 20 years to start to make a major dent in our CO2 emissions if we actually want to stay within a 1.5-degree or 2-degree temperature change between now and 2100.

How significant is this move nationally?

You're talking about the largest state in the U.S., the fifth largest economy in the world, reducing a third of its greenhouse gas emissions. That's huge. You're going to create a huge market in California. But it's also going to stimulate new jobs and drive more investment. Because you're also increasing the volume of production for those vehicles, and the variety of zero-emission vehicles that are available. You start to bring down the cost of those technologies, and that starts to bleed into other states.



On the hood of an electric car, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signs an executive order

requiring all new passenger vehicles sold in the state to be zero-emission by 2035 after a press conference in Sacramento. (Daniel Kim / The Sacramento Bee via AP/Pool)

How does Gov. Newsom's target compare to other countries?

California's announcement aligns with what some of the most progressive countries in the world are doing to also reduce their transportation emissions. You see countries like the UK and Norway, others in the EU, that are also looking at phasing out the internal combustion engine for passenger vehicles. But there's obviously a major disconnect right now between what the states and other countries are doing and where the U.S. federal government is.

California's fight with the Trump administration over auto emissions could end up in the Supreme Court. How much will the November election determine whether a new zero-emission vehicle mandate can actually move forward?

It's pretty significant. A Biden administration, I would assume, would not continue to pursue a case against California in trying to revoke California's waiver, which is what allows them to put in place emissions regulations. And a Biden administration would probably come to the table with California and the auto industry to have more stringent standards rather than trying to roll back the Obama-era standards.

Newsom's order is getting pushback from automakers and the oil industry, who say a mandate will increase costs to consumers. Can we really force people out of gas-guzzling trucks and SUVs and into electric vehicles?

We have so few options right now. So many more vehicles are sold in Europe, for example, than we have available in the U.S., because they have more stringent standards. So I think if you were to present Americans with SUVs and trucks that are cleaner, that are more efficient, that have price parity, that have higher performance standards, why wouldn't you choose that over a gas-powered vehicle?

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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler said that “one state can’t make that big of a difference” in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

One state has already made a big difference. If you look at the efficiency of vehicles across the country today, much of that has been driven by California. They were able to set more stringent standards for tailpipe emissions, which then helped motivate the U.S federal government. With zero-emission vehicles, we need to move faster, which I’m hoping this executive order will help us to do.

Others argue a 15-year timeline isn’t all that radical. The Union of Concerned Scientists calculated that under Newsom’s plan, gas-fueled vehicles could still make up almost half the cars on the road in 2035.

That’s a valid criticism. I mean, you see some countries like Norway that have an accelerated timeline. And there’s complementary programs that we’ve seen in the past, like Cash for Clunkers, that are intended to accelerate the turnover in some of these older vehicles. But you always are balancing what is the most ambitious thing that you can do with what is politically feasible.



Los Angeles traffic on the 105 freeway near the 405 interchange. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Environmental justice groups criticized Gov. Newsom for addressing fossil fuel consumption without doing more to restrict its production. How do you ensure that communities of color near oil drilling sites and other pollution hot spots aren’t left behind?

Another part of the executive order that people aren’t talking as much about is the electrification of heavy-duty vehicles, which are really dirty freight vehicles that tend to be passing through corridors where there’s a lot of disadvantaged communities. So this executive order is also going to reduce pollution from this vehicle source that is having such a disproportionate impact.

What about access? A lot of people can’t afford electric cars.

Economies of scale should help to bring down the cost of these vehicles. Already we’ve seen in the last decade that the cost of batteries has come down about 90%. And as you start to get more EVs on the road, over time more of them will then become used cars in a secondary market that is more affordable to low-income communities.

Last question: What do you drive?

My husband and I share a 13-year-old hybrid that is still very fuel efficient and just won’t seem to kick the bucket. So we’ve been holding on to it. But we’ve committed that our next vehicle will be an electric vehicle. We have a three-month-old, and it turns out that stuffing a stroller and a bunch of baby things into a Honda Civic Hybrid is not easy. We’re hoping that our next vehicle is an electric SUV.

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Here's what else is happening around the West:

There once was a time when Arizona was one of the Southwest's leaders in tackling climate change, in partnership with neighboring states. That has all changed. Arizona lawmakers this year enacted legislation preventing cities and towns from banning natural gas or other fossil fuels in buildings. Erin Stone of the Arizona Republic tracks the state's transition from Janet Napolitano to current Gov. Doug Ducey in [this fascinating and disturbing analysis](#).

Speaking of natural gas, is there anything new to say about SoCal Gas and its aggressive efforts to preserve burning of its product in California? Well, yes there is. Politico's Colby Bermel has some telling details about SoCal Gas' [use of a P.R. firm to recruit Latino and Asian American mayors and civic groups](#) to support continued use of fossil fuels at California's ports. As readers of this newsletter know, The Times' Sammy Roth has written numerous stories about these kinds of tactics, [leading to an investigation of the company, announced in July](#), by the state's consumer watchdog.

So will fossil fuel companies have a seat at the table in a Joe Biden administration? Maybe, but not if liberal activists prevail. A group is [urging the Biden team to reject advisers with any ties to fossil fuel companies](#), as Lisa Friedman and Thomas Kaplan report for the New York Times