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Environment Experts To Newsom: Now's Your Moment

[Ezra David Romero](#)

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Gov. Gavin Newsom tours the North Complex Fire zone in Butte County on Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, outside of Oroville, Calif.

Paul Kitagaki Jr./The Sacramento Bee via AP, Pool

As Gavin Newsom enters the second half of his term as California governor, CapRadio is taking a deep look at Newsom's performance, progress and policies. [Find all of our stories here.](#)

Back in September, while wildfires raged and the pandemic wore on, California Gov. Gavin Newsom held a virtual press conference to announce a bold new climate **goal**. By 2035, he said, all new cars and trucks sold in California would be zero-emission, in order to seriously curtail climate warming-emissions.

"We are marking a new course, we are setting a new marker," Newsom told a camera while standing in front of a few electric cars at Cal Expo in Sacramento. California is poised to lead the rest of the world in the "collective cause" of mitigating climate change, Newsom declared.

"That really was very important," said **Dan Sperling**, founding director of the UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies. "A lot of other countries are now imitating that target,"

But while Newsom has grabbed attention for his clean car policy — so far, he's not earned a broader reputation as an environmental champion.



Newsom's Priorities, Two Years Later

In fact, two years into his administration, environmental experts say he hasn't moved boldly enough on ecological issues — either because he's distracted by other emergencies, or because he's been playing political defense. They say now is his moment to change his strategy.

"He has been a disappointment," said **Kathryn Phillips**, director of Sierra Club California,

adding that his words and actions have been inconsistent. “Initially he wasn't talking about climate change at all, then he started talking about it, then he had to deal with all the fires.”

Newsom's administration has made headway on moving away from fossil fuels — namely by creating policy on zero-emission vehicles and charging infrastructure. His administration has also been busy **filing lawsuits to prevent Trump era environmental rollbacks, such as protections for migratory birds.**

But the environmental community says with other distractions out of the way, now is Newsom's time to take swift action on climate change and alleviate the burden on communities dealing with air and water pollution.

Phillips says Newsom's administration shouldn't be a replay of Gov. Jerry Brown's tenure, which was noted for a more cautious, **step-by-step policy making approach.**

“Incrementalism isn't the thing they want,” Phillips said about the environmental advocacy community, adding that young people want change and clear air. “They want to stop worrying about what the future is going to bring in terms of climate change.”

Climate Work



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 on Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2020, at Cal Expo in Sacramento.

Daniel Kim/The Sacramento Bee via AP, Pool

A month after issuing the executive order about zero-emission vehicles, Newsom called for a different kind of climate policy — conservation of **30% of state lands and waters by 2030**. The goal is to protect species and preserve ecosystems that are vital to controlling carbon emissions. The governor envisions carbon sequestration projects on farms and other landscapes as a major part of preventing the climate crisis from worsening.

“California’s beautiful, natural and working lands are an important tool to help slow and avert catastrophic climate change,” Newsom said in October.

All these steps are important for meeting the state’s climate goals of getting 5 million zero-emission vehicles on roads by 2030 and reaching carbon neutrality by **2045**. Both goals were previously set by the Brown Administration.

But where advocates say Newsom falls short is envisioning a future less dependent on fossil fuels, says **Deborah Sivas**, an attorney with the Stanford University Environmental

Law Clinic.

“The oil and gas side is his real Achilles heel, because there's been several thousand new oil and gas permits issued during his tenure,” she said about Newsom. “It feels a little bit schizophrenic to be promoting these really ambitious climate goals, and yet still facilitating and supporting new fossil fuel infrastructure.”

Sivas says Newsom has the authority to phase out fossil fuels faster — although he'd likely be sued for trying — but it's not a battle he wants to take on.

But **Kate Gordon**, the governor's senior climate advisor, says Newsom's administration is exploring strategies to reduce petroleum production that won't leave California's oil industry workers in the lurch. She says the idea is to not replicate the unjust transition the timber industry experienced as it began to decline in the 1990s.

“We can see the writing on the wall,” said Gordon. “The industry is changing, crude oil demand is way down ... We have time to think ahead about who's at the table. That didn't happen with the timber industry.”

Newsom's team is currently trying to prevent a retreat of the state's previous environmental work by waging numerous lawsuits against the Trump administration, said **Richard Frank** with UC Davis' Environmental Law and Policy Center. Many of the rollbacks would make it tough for California to meet its climate goals.

When the Trump Administration prevented California from setting stringent emissions standards on passenger cars and trucks, Newsom's team found a **workaround**, by negotiating and working directly with automakers to get them to create cars and trucks with better fuel standards.

Frank argues that Newsom would have made more progress on environmental policy if he hadn't had to play defense with the Trump Administration.

“I don't begrudge or criticize the governor in the slightest for his attention being diverted to the attempted Trump Administration rollbacks,” said Frank. “With an incoming Biden administration, hopefully, we'll have a far more collaborative federal state relationship and that in turn should free up Governor Newsom's opportunity to play offense.”

Wildfire



Firefighters monitor a backburn outside Calistoga, CA Thursday, Oct 1, 2020.

Andrew Nixon / CapRadio

Last year's record-setting wildfire season was also a major distraction for Newsom, although he did help create a **new relationship** with the federal government to try to mitigate fire risk. The goal of the federal-state agreement is to thin or burn 1 million acres of forests yearly by 2025.

In his most recent budget, Newsom also proposed to spend a billion dollars on prescribed burns and forest thinning. While that amount of money is a first for fire prevention, says UC Berkeley Forestry Advisor **William Stewart**, it still doesn't go far enough because of the vast and expensive nature of fire mitigation needs.

"We may need to do something different than kind of the small scale projects that we historically know how to do," he said. "There needs to be some people with kind of a skunkworks approach. Can we look at doing this a different way?"

Bills in the U.S. Congress and the **state legislature** may help increase funding for prescribed burns, and Stewart hopes that the Biden Administration will be more active in

managing public lands. He says a change in mindset on the federal level could impact California because more than 50% of public land is managed by the federal government.

“[Fires are] mainly starting on federal lands, that's what's burning,” he said. “There was just no chance to actually have a coherent discussion with the federal government when Trump was in power.”

He says Newsom now has an opportunity to change the fire conversation with the Biden Administration.

Water



In this Feb. 23, 2016 file photo, people try to catch fish along the Sacramento River in the San Joaquin-Sacramento River Delta, near Courtland, Calif.

Rich Pedroncelli / AP Photo

Newsom has made a number of moves to manage the state's water problems, such as

droughts, floods, declining fish populations and an over-reliance on groundwater.

Last summer, the governor **issued a water resilience portfolio** that outlines **142 state actions** to help the state deal with water as the climate crisis worsens. It includes measures to protect drinking water, groundwater and fish in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. (Read more about the plan [here](#).)

“It will protect the water supply for essentially two-thirds of Californians from the very real risk of earthquakes, more extreme floods, prolonged droughts and sea level rise,” said Michael Quigley, co-chair of Californians for Water Security, about the governor’s plan.

The roadmap supports the idea of a tunnel construction project that would carry water from Northern California to the southern parts of the state. The idea has been lauded by farmers.

But creating this \$17 billion one-tunnel project doesn’t sit well with environmental groups like Sierra Club California, which has asked the administration to come up with alternatives.

“His administration has shown a level of naivete about water policy in the state and that’s sort of jaw dropping,” said Phillips, the group’s director, adding that the new plan is very similar to a two-tunnel project touted by Gov. Jerry Brown.

“They continue to believe that this project that was first proposed in the 1940s will still satisfy California's water needs, even as we face a critical climate crisis that's changing the way water flows.”

Frank, with the UC Davis Environmental Law and Policy Center, says Newsom needs to focus on preserving the future supply of groundwater, not just give it “the proverbial nod and a wink.”

The governor’s administration needs to find “a new way of doing business that makes our groundwater aquifer sustainable over the long term,” he said.

Frank said if precipitation patterns don’t shift this winter, the state could soon enter another multi-year drought, just years after exiting the last one. That’s just another reason Newsom should take a serious look at groundwater reserves, he said.

“It's out of sight out of mind until there's a major water shortage,” Frank said.

Newsom's Opportunity



In this July 24, 2019, file photo, Gov. Gavin Newsom tours the Chevron oil field west of Bakersfield where a spill of more than 800,000 gallons flowed into a dry creek bed in McKittrick, Calif.

Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times via AP, Pool, File

Advocates and policy experts are keenly interested in what Newsom can do going forward, under the new Biden administration.

On the climate front, advocates like Alvaro Sanchez of the Greenlining Institute want the governor to “set a date” to phase out fossil fuels, starting with an extraction method called **fracking**. In September, Newsom asked the legislature to come up with a plan to phase out the practice.

“That's ultimately what's going to be needed to be successful in the climate,” said Sanchez, environmental equity director for the Institute. “Until we do so, we're just gonna be extending the life cycle of something that we know is cancerous to our lives.”

Sanchez says tackling fossil fuels more aggressively would expedite the state's progress on climate goals, and improve everyday living conditions for Californians in polluted parts of the state.

He also says Newsom and other California lawmakers need to take more seriously the negative health outcomes that polluted air and water has on disenfranchised communities.

"There are communities in California that have not been seen by our climate policy," he said. "Believe what folks are saying and ... really incorporate what they are asking for into our actual strategies."

With a new presidential administration focused on equity and climate change, Sanchez says the cap is now lifted off the governor. He says now is the time for Newsom to meet the moment and be bold on the environment.

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Newsom's Priorities, Two Years Later

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Climate Change



Ezra David Romero

Environment Reporter

Here at CapRadio, I report on all kinds of stories on our environment. Everything from “floodplain fatties” to comparing the Green New Deal to California's climate policies to podcasts like YosemiteLand and TahoeLand. [Read Full Bio](#) ☐

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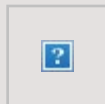
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