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CLIMATE CHANGE

State likely won't reach emission goals

Californians' love of pickups and SUVs, along with wildfires, to blame, report says

By Andrew Sheeler
The Sacramento Bee

California is not on track to meet its greenhouse gas emission goals, in part because Californians aren't ready to give up their trucks and SUVs.

A new study by nonprofit group Next 10 and Beacon Economics found that Californians in late 2018 owned more gas-guzzling pickups, minivans and SUVs than they did five years ago. Those vehicles made up 57.3% of new vehicle registrations in 2018, compared with 39.3% in 2013.

The wildfires that scorched California in 2017 and 2018 were another setback, pumping tens of millions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere and offsetting the state's efforts to curtail man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

The new report from Next 10 and Beacon Economics shows that the Golden State is unlikely to reach its carbon reduction goals for 2030 and 2050 at the current rate of progression. A law signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2016 sets a target of cutting the state's greenhouse gas emissions to 40% below 1990 levels by 2030.

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California is locked in a dispute with President Donald Trump about the state's legal authority to impose stricter air pollution standards on vehicles. The California Air Resources Board has used that power to negotiate pacts with carmakers committing them to produce fuel-efficient vehicles that average 50 miles per gallon of gas.

The Trump administration has sought to revoke California's regulatory power and moved to impose a less aggressive target for fuel efficiency of 37 miles per gallon. Trump wrote on Twitter that his plan would let car manufacturers "produce far less expensive cars for the consumer, while at the same time making the cars substantially SAFER."

Study co-author Noel Perry of Next 10 wrote that California "has some hard truths to face as it looks to deliver much steeper annual emissions reductions in the years ahead."

Transportation makes up a significant amount of

Emissions

the state's total emissions; it accounted for 41.1% of the state's total greenhouse gas emissions, according to the California Air Resources Board.

California lawmakers and the Air Resources Board have been devising incentives to persuade more people and businesses to buy electric cars and other zero-emission vehicles. Frito-Lay last week, for instance, unveiled a fleet of electric semitrucks that it bought in part with state grants.

Lawmakers weighed a bill this session to expand the rebate for buying an electric car to $7,500; that bill has been made into a two-year bill.

The state has seen a rise in electric car ownership, with electric vehicle use up 37% in 2017, but Adam Fowler of Beacon Economics said more bold action is needed to reduce transportation-based greenhouse gas reduction.

"The time for timidity is passed, especially around transportation," Fowler said.

One proposal few would call timid is to remove gas-powered vehicles from the road. Assemblyman Phil Ting, D-San Francisco, in 2017 proposed a bill that would end sales of new gas-powered cars by 2040. It didn't pass, but Democratic presidential candidates are now including the proposal as part of their platforms.

The report also raised concern about the emissions produced by California's wildfires. In 2018, wildfires put so much greenhouse gas into the atmosphere that they exceeded, nine times over, the amount of emissions reduced in 2017.

Wildfires in 2018 burned more than 1.8 million acres of land and accounted for more emissions in California than did the state's commercial, residential and agricultural sectors in 2017.

Wildfires pumped 45.5 million metric tons of carbon into the atmosphere in 2018, a 24% increase from the year before.

"What we're learning is that climate successes can be fragile — and one devastating fire can eclipse hard-won emissions reductions gains," Perry said in the report.

The report also noted that devastating wildfires are becoming more frequent, with 10 of the state's most destructive fires all occurring since 2010, and 19 of the worst fires having occurred within the past 30 years.

Both Perry and Fowler said California can still reach the goal it put into law.

"Even though this is a sobering report in terms of the goals in front of us, very big goals, I remain optimistic," Perry said. "California historically has been very successful in being a worldwide innovator when it comes to climate change policy. We need these ambitious policies to drive transformative change."

California has undertaken several measures to reduce emissions and cut the state's carbon footprint.

In 2018, Brown signed a bill into law requiring that all retail electricity be carbon-free by 2045. The state also has had a cap-and-trade program since 2013.

Critics of those efforts say that they drive up the cost of electricity to consumers and that businesses forced to buy pollution credits through the cap-and-trade program pass new fees on to Californians. A report compiled by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce this year showed that Californians pay higher rates for electricity than residents of 43 other states.

Fowler said still more action is needed to achieve the state's environmental goals.

"We're at an inflection point, and transformative change from the policy realm that opens up markets and spurs innovation is something we need from a number of sectors in our economy," he said.