

Jerry Brown sets aggressive California climate goal

Sammy Roth, The Desert Sun 5:15 p.m. PDT April 29, 2015



(Photo: AP)

Gov. Jerry Brown launched an ambitious new effort to limit climate change Wednesday, calling for California to cut its planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 — the toughest carbon goal adopted by any North American government for that time frame.

Brown's new target, issued via [executive order \(http://gov.ca.gov/news.php?id=18938\)](http://gov.ca.gov/news.php?id=18938), is a clear sign the governor wants California to influence the international dialogue between now and December, when world leaders will gather in Paris to negotiate a global climate change treaty. The 40 percent target is more aggressive than the [climate goals \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/climate-change\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/climate-change) that President Barack Obama announced last year, but in line with the [European Union's targets \(http://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/brief/eu/\)](http://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/brief/eu/).

"With this order, California sets a very high bar for itself and other states and nations, but it's one that must be reached — for this generation and generations to come," Brown said in a statement.

California is already working to reduce its emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, as mandated by state law. Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger previously set a target of reducing emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, and Brown framed the new target as an interim step toward meeting that long-term goal.

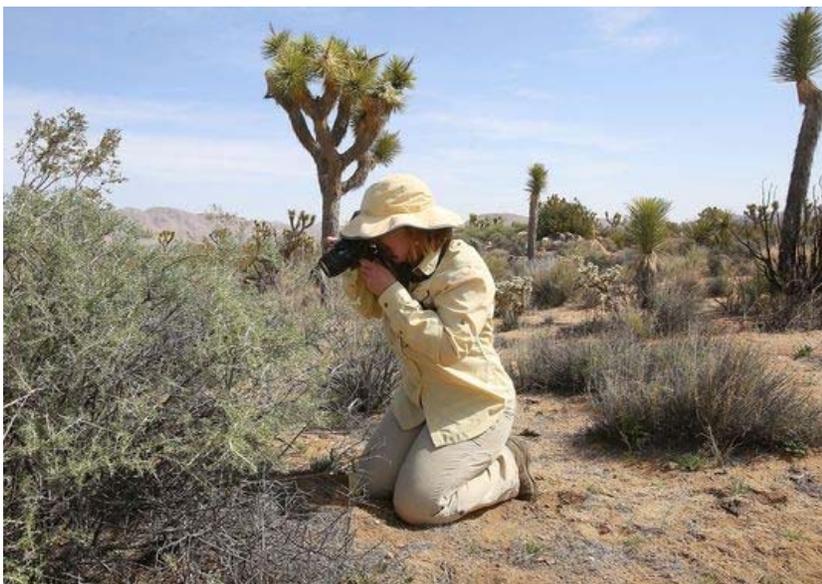
Still, experts say the 40 percent goal is important in its own right. Alex Jackson, legal director for the Natural Resources Defense Council's California Climate Program, said the 2030 goal offers a "near-term, clear signal on the direction California is going," minimizing regulatory uncertainty.

"Our long-term objectives are really what matter, in terms of achieving the levels of climate stabilization that's going to be required to avoid the worst impacts of climate change," Jackson said. "But those targets are a ways off in the distance."

There's also a practical benefit to cutting emissions sooner rather than later, even if California ultimately hits its 2050 goal either way. Climate change is cumulative, meaning today's emissions will wreak havoc on the climate not just this year, but in the decades and even centuries to come.

"We really need to accelerate our efforts here in the near term," Jackson said. "The sooner we make these investments, the sooner we can grow clean energy and the benefits associated with it."

Buy Photo



Mary Rowe of Boston records the plants and animals on a plot of land in Joshua Tree National Park earlier this month. The park is already being impacted by climate change, and Rowe and other "citizen scientists" conducted a survey of plants and animals as part of an effort to record the effects of climate change over time. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

**DESERT SUN**[Volunteers helping study climate change in Joshua Tree](#)[\(http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2015/04/12/climate-change-citizen-scientists-joshua-tree/25536697/\)](http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2015/04/12/climate-change-citizen-scientists-joshua-tree/25536697/)

In 2012, the most recent year for which the California Air Resources Board has certified data, the state emitted 459 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent — 6 percent more than it emitted in 1990. That means, relative to 2012 levels, the state will now need to reduce its emissions 6.5 percent by 2020, 44 percent by 2030 and 81 percent by 2050.

State policymakers have already launched a host of programs aimed at meeting those goals, including a renewable energy mandate, a cap-and-trade program to reduce industrial emissions and a host of incentives to buy electric vehicles. Mary Nichols, chair of the California Air Resources Board, said the 40 percent goal would speed up many of those programs.

"Building on our existing climate programs, the 40 percent reduction will drive and accelerate innovation, generate new jobs, improve air quality and hasten California's transition to a clean energy economy," Nichols said in a statement.

Renewable energy advocates cheered Brown's announcement, although it's not clear the new goal significantly changes the outlook for clean energy. Brown has already [called for](#) (</story/news/environment/2015/02/02/developers-local-lawmaker-look-clean-energy-goal/22750773/>) California to get 50 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, and lawmakers are considering a bill that would codify that goal into state law. A version of that proposal is almost certain to pass the state Legislature.

[Buy Photo](#)

Open desert surrounds the Desert Sunlight solar project near Desert Center, in eastern Riverside County. At 550 megawatts, it's the world's largest solar power plant. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

But for clean energy backers, the 40 percent greenhouse gas target is another sign that California will continue to move away from carbon-emitting energy sources like coal, oil and natural gas. That bodes especially well for the desert, which has some of the best solar, wind and geothermal resources in the state.

"The most important thing is we stay on the trajectory to 2050, and we set the 2030 and 2040 goals with that in mind," said V. John White, executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, a Sacramento advocacy group. "By putting our gaze on the far horizon, it will get us to start thinking and planning and doing things that will be needed."

California already gets nearly a quarter of its electricity from renewable sources, but if it's going to reach 50 percent, it will need to overcome some obstacles. Chief among them: the electric grid isn't built to handle large quantities of solar and wind power, which only generate electricity when the sun shines or the wind blows.

Solving that problem will probably involve developing clean energy sources that can generate electricity throughout the day and night. Policymakers have started discussing a "[clean energy standard](#)" (</story/news/environment/2015/02/02/developers-local-lawmaker-look-clean-energy-goal/22750773/>) that would encourage utilities to buy more reliable — and more expensive — renewable resources like geothermal, biomass and concentrated solar power with energy storage.



A geothermal power plant on the southern shore of the Salton Sea is visible from Red Hill Bay on Dec. 14, 2012. (Photo: Omar Ornelas/The Desert Sun)

State Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, has introduced a bill to that effect, which could boost the Imperial Valley's long-dormant geothermal industry. Garcia's Clean Energy Act — which cleared the Assembly's Natural Resources Committee in a 6-2 vote Monday — would require the California Public Utilities Commission to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of renewable energy sources not just by their up-front costs, but by their ability to benefit the grid.

Garcia said he and other legislators met with members of the governor's office Tuesday evening to discuss Wednesday morning's announcement, and was told his bill "is a key component to the overall goal of getting to the 50 percent target."

"That is where geothermal plays a critical role," he said.

Still, the energy sector accounts for just 20 percent of California's greenhouse gas emissions, and clean energy is just one piece of California's climate plan. Lawmakers are considering legislation that would require the state to cut its petroleum use 50 percent and double the energy efficiency of existing buildings by 2030, in line with [additional goals \(/story/tech/science/greenenergy/2015/01/05/brown-renewable-energy-goals/21311419/\)](#) that Brown announced in January.

Buy Photo



Tesla Motors opens its showroom in Cathedral City on Friday, May 9, 2014. California policymakers hope to reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging more consumers to buy electric vehicles. (Photo: Omar Ornelas/ The Desert Sun)

Brown's Wednesday executive order also directs state agencies to incorporate climate change impacts into their long-term infrastructure planning, and to

keep climate in mind when making investment decisions.

"It's all significant," White said. "The infrastructure planning is particularly important for the electric grid, and for the development of resources such as geothermal and large-scale storage."

Sammy Roth covers energy for The Desert Sun. He can be reached at sammy.roth@desertsun.com, (760) 778-4622 and @Sammy_Roth.

Read or Share this story: <http://desert.sn/1zrdcmx>