

Environment & Energy

Record Plunge in California's Climate Emissions Seen as Outlier

By Zach Bright

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- 'Steepest recorded drop' in greenhouse gas emissions
 - Drivers back on roads, wildfires add to GHG loads now
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California's greenhouse gas emissions are expected to rebound after falling by a record amount in 2020 during the pandemic, the chief of the state's air regulator said ahead of a report released Wednesday.

Carbon dioxide emissions fell to 369.2 million metric tons from 404.5 million, or about 9%, in what the California Air Resources Board's chief executive, Steven Cliff, called the "steepest recorded drop in greenhouse gas for the state."

"This year will be looked at as an outlier and cannot be used as a reliable data point to predict trends for the years to come," he said during a briefing.

Emissions are expected to rebound over the next few years, Cliff said, particularly transportation and industrial emissions, which were suppressed in 2020 by stay-at-home orders.

In addition, an August report from University of California Los Angeles and University of Chicago researchers shows that reductions like 2020's may have been lost to raging wildfires that same year.

"Wildfires are an important source of emissions and devastating to the communities that they impact," Cliff said in reference to the report. "That, nevertheless, doesn't change our need for reductions across those sources of emissions that we can control."

Wildfire emissions won't be counted toward the state's 2030 goal—a 40% greenhouse gas emissions reduction from 1990 levels—but will be counted toward the state's 2045 goal to become neutral, Cliff added.

The California Air Resources Board is set to adopt the latest version of its scoping plan, the state's strategy to reduce greenhouse gases, in December.

The Biggest Sources

Transportation made up the lion's share of emissions at 37% in 2020 but saw the steepest decline out of any sector at 16% compared to 2019.

The state's stay-at-home orders to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 and a substantial rise in teleworking among the state's workforce were likely factors, said Nicole Dolney, who heads the Air Resources Board's greenhouse gas inventory.

The lifestyle changes were coupled with an 18% growth in electric vehicles, continued improvements to fuel efficiency, and a rise in biodiesel and renewable diesel to 21% of all diesel sold in California that year.

The industrial sector created the next largest share of emissions, dropping by 9% from 2019 numbers, a result of lower emissions from refiners and oil and gas producers.

Emissions from electricity generated in and imported to the state remained about same compared to 2019. A 44% decrease in state hydropower generation from below-average precipitation was balanced out by a 10% growth in state solar generation and cleaner imported electricity, Dolney said.

Commercial and residential sources—dominated by natural gas combustion for space heating, cooking, and hot water generation— decreased by 4%. Dolney attributed the decline to less cold weather, resulting in reduced need for building heating.

Other sources included agriculture, high global warming potential emissions (from other warming gases such as methane and hydrofluorocarbons), and recycling and waste. Overall emissions from those sectors remained about the same.

Corrections to inventory methodology in the latest report decreased the amount of man-made emissions evaluated in previous years.

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