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CALIFORNIA CLIMATE CHANGE PROJECT BRIEF SUMMARY



Political Challenges Related to Achieving Emissions Reductions In the State of California: A Historical Perspective

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Achieving California's goals for greenhouse gas emissions will require surmounting significant political and institutional challenges. This summary discusses the history of California oil politics in order to identify key political and institutional constraints that can be expected to influence future policy development. It also explores contextual issues likely to determine the success or failure of emissions reduction efforts.

California has demonstrated political will in the past to reshape its energy production and transportation systems. Notable political accomplishments include:

- Legislative restrictions on coastal oil drilling, which have kept valuable oil reserves undeveloped;
- Breaking open the "lockbox" on gasoline tax revenues to fund mass transit construction;
- The creation of a far-reaching air regulatory system prior to the federal Clean Air Act; and,
- The establishment of statewide appliance and building efficiency standards.

These accomplishments offer hope that the state can achieve significant policy goals. Because of these kinds of legislative efforts, California's per capita electricity use is relatively low by national standards, and the growth of electricity consumption in recent decades has been below the national average. At the same time, it is sobering to note that these hard fought and significant past policy changes have done relatively little to change the upward trajectory of California's growing dependence on oil and motor vehicles. In addition, past policy achievements clearly are not commensurate with present challenges. The effort to reduce future emissions will need to involve more fundamental changes to our energy economy.

It is difficult to identify historical analogies to the present public effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The rise of the oil economy a century ago was politically hard fought and similar in scale to what must lie ahead. Yet the transition from coal to oil differed greatly from the current effort in that powerful private economic interests pushed for more flexible fuels and for profits from oil and automobile production and real estate development. At the present time, governments and civic advocates are leading the effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Other than shared consequences of climate change, there is no economic imperative, and only a weak economic constituency, for the public effort to wean ourselves from oil, coal, and natural gas.

California will not achieve its emissions reductions goals unless it can identify or bring into existence economically successful, independent, and forceful advocates for a lower-emissions regime. Possible future constituencies might include providers of energy-efficient products; low carbon energy producers; insurers with financial exposure to climatic risks; low-lying coastal cities threatened by rising sea levels; and tourist businesses endangered by climatic change. California also will need to distribute economic benefits in a way that will generate political support for climate change policy. Additionally, companies striving to develop an environmentally responsible brand could provide critical support for emissions reduction efforts.

To achieve change of historic proportions, California will need a much broader set of climate-change strategies and leaders. The climate change initiatives led by scientists and lawyers in the twenty-five years since the path-breaking *Charney Report* (1979) and the *Global 2000 Report to the President* (1981) largely have failed to make headway against the problem. They demonstrate the need for a broader effort, one that goes well beyond technical expertise. The state government and other entities in California urgently need to invest in a network of climate and energy leaders throughout California who represent a broad range of socio-economic and cultural groups and also draw from diverse sectors of California society, including businesses, non-profits, government, higher education, and faith and community-based organizations. A network of this kind will be essential to generate and sustain political support for policy innovation. Diverse leaders, ranging well beyond lawyers and scientists, also will introduce a broader set of important climate-related public issues, including cultural identity, faith and moral responsibility, and equity.

Policy-makers must expect on-going political choices and struggle, rather than a one-time fix. Emissions reductions efforts are taking place within the context of the hard-fought political conflict that underlies the current energy regime. An ambitious program to achieve emissions reductions will benefit from a broader political framework that provides context for the government's role in shaping energy markets. In particular, policy-makers and decision-makers could benefit from a historical framework that acknowledges how past political interventions helped create California's present energy and transportation mix, and that demonstrates why political initiatives now are necessary to redirect the energy system.

Because of the complex state-federal interplay, state-based initiatives in California's emissions reduction plan must be designed to contribute to political strategies that will help generate national momentum on climate change. State-federal relations have influenced California's energy history profoundly since the early twentieth century. The state historically has controlled many levers to influence energy production and consumption in California. California also has a long tradition of state leadership on energy and transportation policy, including innovation by the California Air Resources Board and the California Coastal Commission. At the same time, California's path is significantly constrained by federal legislation, agency regulations, and court decisions. In addition, California competes economically within the national and international arena. Consequently, while California may accomplish a great deal alone, it can only achieve its 2050 emissions reductions goals, and its larger aspiration of addressing the climate change problem, through alliances with other states and by influencing the national climate change policy debate. State initiatives should be designed to meet twin goals: reducing emissions in the state and advancing multi-state and national climate change policy.

*This summary is based on Political Challenges Related to Achieving Emissions Reduction in the State of California: A Historical Perspective by Paul Sabin available at <http://environment.stanford.edu/ideas/cccp.html> which draws substantially on prior writings by the author, including: Paul Sabin, *Crude Politics: The California Oil Market, 1900-1940*. Berkeley: University of California, 2005.*