

A climate problem even California can't fix: tailpipe pollution

Written by Joan Russow

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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - For three decades, California has led the fight to control tailpipe pollution, with countless policies promoting cleaner gasoline, carpooling, public transportation and its signature strategy - the electric vehicle.

Rush hour traffic moves north and south on interstate 5 near Encinitas, California, U.S. October, 24, 2018. REUTERS/Mike Blake Californians now buy more than half of all EVs sold in the United States, and the state's auto-pollution policies have provided a model being adopted around the world.

But they're not working at home, by the state's own measure. Tailpipe pollution here is going up, not down, despite billions of dollars spent by one of the most environmentally progressive governments on earth.

"The strategies that we've used up until now just haven't been effective," Mary Nichols, the head of the California Air Resources Board, told Reuters.

That failure has less to do with energy or environmental policies and more with decades-old urban planning decisions that made California – and especially Los Angeles – a haven for sprawling development of single-family homes and long commutes, according to state officials.

California's struggle bodes poorly for other major U.S. cities with similar sprawl and expensive urban housing – such as Houston, Atlanta, and others that planned their cities around cars - and casts doubt on whether the United States can meet its pledged carbon cuts under an international agreement to fight climate change.

The state's troubles also hold lessons for massive economies including China and India, major carbon emitters that hope to control pollution from vehicles as they rapidly urbanize.

Transportation is tied with power generation as America's leading source of carbon dioxide emissions, at 28 percent, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – and it takes top billing in California, at about 40 percent. It makes up a smaller share in the rest of the world, where car ownership is lower but likely to grow.

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California's carbon emissions amounted to 429 million metric tons in 2016, the last year for which data is available. That's the lowest level since 1990 thanks to a shift away from coal-fired electricity toward natural gas, solar and wind.

But its next target - calling for a further 40 percent cut by 2030 - will be out of reach without transformative changes in state residents' driving habits, CARB said in a report published late last year.

As the state struggles to cut its own vehicle pollution, California officials are also fighting an effort by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump to weaken national standards for automobile emissions. A spokesman for newly-elected Governor Gavin Newsom, who ran on a promise to continue California's legacy of climate action, did not return requests for comment.