



Why CA Gov. Brown is not the climate leader the world thinks he is

Backdoor dealings with the powerful oil industry and their cap-and-trade program reveal Governor Brown's betrayal to environmental justice communities across California.

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Governor Jerry Brown could hardly contain his excitement [last month](#) as he signed California's landmark extension to the state Cap-and-Trade program, [a market based carbon mitigation](#) effort where polluters buy and sell permits that allow a set amount of pollution to be released into the atmosphere.

The highly acclaimed, yet controversial, bill extends a measure originally enacted by Republican Governor Schwarzenegger until 2030, and was criticized by nearly [every major environmental justice group in the state](#) as a betrayal to front-line communities as well as one of the biggest wins for Big Oil in recent memory.

In a state with a Democratic super-majority famous for strict fuel emission standards and progressive politics, it's shocking to learn just how complicit we are when it comes to pollution from dirty energy production and seemingly endless traffic.

"This isn't for me. I'm going to be dead. It's for you. And it's damn real," said the 79 year old Governor speaking on the imminent dangers of climate change including mass migrations and ever increasing forest fires across California.

Often called "Gov. Moonbeam" by critics and supporters alike, the 40-year political veteran has advocated passionately for the environment since he first succeeded the governorship from Ronald Reagan in 1975.

Today, the infiltration of a climate-denying corporate cabal into the U.S. federal government (including a former Exxonmobil CEO as Secretary of State) has purged the executive branch of any meaningful resistance to the fossil fuel industry and cemented the four-time governor as the country's de facto leader on climate action.

While U.S. President Trump was busy withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, Governor Brown was meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other world leaders to talk joint efforts on greenhouse gas mitigation.

The role of California as a global leader on climate action was made even more apparent earlier this year as the Prime Minister of Fiji and this year's president to COP 23, the international climate change negotiations, named Brown a special envoy to the climate talks which will be hosted in Bonn, Germany, this November.

With some reports suggesting overall greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions [dropping since 2010](#) and such progressive pieces of climate legislation including one that mandates California to receive half of its energy from renewable sources by 2030, it should come as no surprise that the state is leading much of the world in the green energy revolution.

Another bill in the works, ([SB100](#)) would have California, the world's sixth largest economy with its \$2.4 Trillion GDP, reach 100% renewable energy by 2045; an unprecedented goal unmatched by any government of this size.

It's easy to understand why Brown has received a hero's welcome on the global climate stage, but while the governor is lauded as an environmental champion by world leaders, California communities struggling with environmental injustices back home can hardly breathe.

A "State of the Air" report by the American Lung Association [found](#) that California, which makes up less than 15% of the country's population, is vastly over-represented when it comes to national municipalities with the worst air quality. The 2016 study found that 8 out of 10 Californians live in counties with unhealthy levels of either ozone or particle pollution.

In fact, since the start of cap-and-trade in 2013, several industry sectors have actually seen increases in in-state GHG levels with “many high emitting companies having used out-of-state “offset” projects to meet compliance obligations.”

As Governor Brown signed the cap-and-trade extension many consider to be one of the most important parts of his legacy, environmental justice leaders expressed their outrage at the bill’s passing.

“Rather than showing a bold, innovative vision for California climate policy,” said co-director Vanderwarker of the CA Environmental Justice Alliance. “Governor Brown and our legislative leadership provided industry concessions that undermine the tools our state has to fight climate change.”

Indeed, critics of the market-based proposal railed against the [secret meetings between Brown’s office and the fossil fuel industry](#) which resulted in cap-and-trade policy closely resembling the wish list of powerful oil lobby WSPA, the Western States Petroleum Association.

Many recommendations from the oil lobby ended up making it into the final bill, the only one of its kind in the country, including clauses that implement a slower rising cap on carbon emission reductions and the exclusive authority to the California Air Resources Board for regulating greenhouse gases – a move especially troubling considering the [distrust of state regulatory boards by many Californians](#).

Earlier this year, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District instituted the world’s strongest refinery pollution cap, only to be blocked by the new cap-and-trade rule that limits any local air quality agencies from curbing greenhouse gases beyond parameters set forth in the bill. The largest oil refinery on the west coast is operated by Chevron in Richmond, CA. California Air Resource Board (CARB) undermines local efforts to reduce pollution in low-income communities of color.

The program extension will also award tens of billions of dollars’ worth of free carbon emission permits that were originally set to expire in 2020, and allows polluters to continue

buying “[carbon offsets](#)” thereby polluting their community on the condition that they invest in environmentally friendlier projects elsewhere.

Opponents of the market-based solution argue that at the very least, real climate leadership means [mandatory pollution reductions](#) at the source, and that cap-and trade actually undermines California’s efforts to reach our state goal of a 40% reduction in GHG emissions by 2030.

A California Air Resources Board study found that [over 24,000 lives are lost every year in California due to respiratory illnesses](#) and other health epidemics resulting from industrial fossil fuel operations in places like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and the San Joaquin Valley.

Democratic leaders applauded the extension’s companion bill ([AB 617](#)) and welcomed the revenue that would come from the pay-to-pollute system as a means to improve fatal levels of air quality in low-income communities of color, many of which were toured by the governor last summer.

Critics of Brown have argued that his persona as an environmentalist merely represents the governor’s best shot at following in his father’s footsteps in cementing a strong legacy.

One of the governor’s infrastructural legacies includes building massive underground water export tunnels that would over-pump water from the [San Francisco Bay Delta](#) and create “the largest transfer of public wealth to private resources in the history of California.”

Brown is calling these 30-mile long tunnels the “California Water Fix,” yet far from fixing the state’s water issues, the plan will devastate the largest estuary on the west coast and endanger hundreds of wildlife and plant species in the name of Big Agriculture.

Californians who rely on the Delta waterways insist that simple and archaic solutions will not save the state from our water woes, and their confidence in Governor Brown as an environmentalist is waning.

Early in 2015, thousands gathered in Brown's hometown of Oakland, CA, to demand real climate leadership and for the governor to take steps to ban hydraulic fracturing (fracking) in the state amidst studies showing the dangers of fracking to our health and water.

To this day, Governor Brown has failed to ban fracking despite [a handful of other U.S. states and six CA counties outlawing the practice](#) and citing the environmental risks as far outweighing any potential benefits.

Later in that same year, the worst greenhouse gas disaster in U.S. history manifested itself when the Aliso Canyon gas storage facility leaked an estimated 97,000 tons of methane outside of the LA area over the span of four months.

Over 25,000 community members living near the gas leak had to be relocated due to a "horrendous safety catastrophe" causing countless cases of nausea and nosebleeds and to date have seen no effort to bring anyone to justice despite there being some 14,000 plaintiffs and hundreds of lawsuits.

On July 31st of this year, SoCalGas once again began operations at the Aliso Canyon gas storage facility outside of LA, following the go-ahead from Brown and undeterred by calls from [Save Porter Ranch](#) to complete environmental and seismic studies.

Consumer Watchdog released a [report](#) this month exposing a conflict of interest wherein Kathleen Brown, Governor Brown's sister, had earned over \$1,000,000 since she joined SEMPRA (the company behind SoCalGas) in 2013.

Under Governor Brown and with the approval of the CA Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), California has built 15 new fossil fuel power plants since his time in office against demand for natural gas dropping.

Another Consumer Watchdog report titled "[Brown's Dirty Hands](#)" revealed that the Governor has received nearly \$10 million in donations to his gubernatorial campaigns and favorite causes since 2010 from fossil fuel interests including PG&E, Edison, Chevron, and SEMPRA.

“The governor’s leadership on climate is unmatched,” said Brown’s deputy press secretary in response to the report. “Those claims are downright cuckoo.”

If the planet is a sinking ship and the water flowing onto our ship is carbon emissions, then California is being praised for using a teacup while everyone else uses spoons to splash the water back into the ocean.

Not only does California possess the labor, technology, and community support to build buckets, but even our measly teacup is riddled with holes.

California is a climate leader by global standards, but still sinking along with the rest of the world.

This summer while in Germany, Brown called for a global climate summit to be hosted in San Francisco late next year in order to “spur a deeper commitment” to fighting the forces of carbonization.

“If we don’t do something about climate change,” says Governor Brown. “It’s the end of the world as we know it.”

The road to responsible climate action; however, is getting narrower by the day and does not include expanding oil and gas projects by the dozens, nor will it come through market based solutions and massive water tunnels.

If California wants to truly lead on the environment, then we can start by holding our leaders accountable to the front-line and indigenous communities that have been struggling against fossil fuel encroachment for decades.