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Democrats Flesh Out Green New Deal With Bill To End Sales Of Gas-Burning Cars By 2040

Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) is reintroducing a bill from six months ago, but this time in a radically different political environment.

By [Alexander C. Kaufman](#)

Just days after carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere hit a level not seen in 800,000 years, Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) is proposing a bill to completely phase out new gas-burning cars by 2040.

The [legislation](#) mandates zero-emissions vehicles to make up 50% of new sales by 2030, and ratchets up the requirement 5% every year for a decade. Merkley plans to submit the bill on the Senate floor Wednesday.

It’s an ambitious proposal, and one almost certain to go nowhere in a Republican-controlled Senate and under an administration that’s in the process of reversing rules to make combustion-engine vehicles more fuel efficient.

The bill is almost identical to legislation Merkley introduced in November in the last Congress. What’s changed is the political framework into which it now fits.

Over the past six months, the [Green New Deal](#) has emerged as a new guiding vision for climate policy, calling for a decade-long industrial plan to zero out emissions, fortify infrastructure and eliminate poverty with millions of union-wage jobs. But while the movement is fast becoming a major political force, particularly ahead of the 2020 Democratic primaries, the Green New Deal's proponents have yet to produce any actual policy.

"When I take a lungful of air in this moment, it has 30% more carbon in it than when I was born," Merkley told HuffPost. "That is a change that has never happened in a single generation of humankind on this planet."

The zero-emissions vehicle bill offers one example of what policy to cut emissions from transportation, the United States' [largest source](#) of planet-warming gases, could look like.

"This is just one small contributor to that vision," Merkley said. "But we need to develop the details around many ideas so those ideas are ready to be combined into a larger package."

Far from the Green New Deal's revolutionary clarion calls, the bill does the unsexy work of translating popular state programs into national policy. The legislation works by providing zero-emission vehicle credits to manufacturers. Those credits make it so each car sold earns a certain number of credits based on the battery range and type of zero-emission vehicle, according to a Union of Concerned Scientists [factsheet](#). For example, hybrid vehicles earn a partial credit, while all-electric cars earn a full credit.

The bill sets a minimum percentage of new car sales required to be covered by credits, and ramps that figure up annually until 2040, at which point all new vehicles sold would need to meet the mandate. Because the nation's car fleet turns over every decade, the bill would ostensibly take nearly all fossil-fueled cars off the road by 2050.

That's far slower than what's needed to keep average global temperatures from rising another half a degree to 1.5 degrees Celsius, or 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit, at which point the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts extreme weather and sea level rise will cause at least \$54 trillion in damages and cost millions of lives. And the bill doesn't address emissions from trucks or heavy-duty vehicles.

But Merkley said the bill is meant to be a starting point based on existing state policy, and the requirements under this legislation already set a faster timeline than what California requires.

"The faster it can be done the better," he said. "If the world changes fast enough, and we can move even faster, then great."

As it is, the legislation proposes phasing out combustion-engine vehicles faster than worldwide market trends are forecast to do so. By 2040, electric vehicles are forecast to make up 57% of global passenger car sales, according to the research firm BloombergNEF's latest annual outlook, published Wednesday. Heavy trucks, the analysis found, "will prove the hardest segment for electrics to crack" with a much lower 19% of total sales in 2040.

Sens. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), Kamala Harris (D-Calif.), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), the latter three of whom are candidates for president, co-sponsored the bill. Rep. Mike Levin (D-Calif.) plans to introduce champion legislation in the House.

“If we can’t get a larger package, but we can get individual pieces like electric cars, buses, better insulation, then we should do that, too,” Merkley said. “We need to push at every level.”

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If the legislation gains traction, it’s likely to face fierce opposition from the auto industry. Automakers, despite paying lip service to cutting emissions in the face of the climate crisis, pay dues to trade associations that worked [alongside the oil industry](#) to [aggressively lobby](#) the Trump White House to gut Obama-era rules that promised to reduce demand for oil by [12 billion barrels](#) per year.

Zero-emission vehicles made up just [1.9% of total sales](#) nationwide last year, according to the Auto Alliance. The trade group, which cheered the Trump administration’s rollback last year, frequently criticizes mandates like the one Merkley proposed as being out of sync with car buyers’ demands.

Even the companies voluntarily making strides to build to more zero-emissions cars fall far short of cuts scientists say are needed to keep warming within a range that won’t render the planet unrecognizable to today. On Monday, Mercedes-Benz maker Daimler AG [announced](#) the most ambitious climate strategy of any automaker to date, yet the plan was light on detail and gave the company until 2039 to reach the woefully ambiguous goal of becoming “carbon neutral.”

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“The auto companies are currently fighting against making more electric vehicles, and they, of course, would try to prevent this from becoming law,” he said. “It’s absolutely aggressive, and it should be.”

As a policy vision, it’s a formidable document. But it could pose practical problems if it became politically viable and automakers successfully lobbied to bring its scope in line with the type of zero-emission vehicle policy companies like General Motors [have proposed](#).

Absent firm federal policy, states, led by California, are charging ahead with rules to ramp up fuel efficiency even as the Environmental Protection Agency rolls back its own regulations. But setting stricter zero-emission vehicle policy than California could set a precedent for superseding the Golden State’s own rules, which are historically much stronger than the federal standard.

Changing that could jeopardize California's [role as a bulwark](#) against future administrations with Trump-like biases toward fossil fuels.

As it stands, the bill would not preempt states. "It provides a federal floor but there is no ceiling on how aggressive states can be," a Merkley spokeswoman said.

This article has been updated to include an additional comment from Merkley's spokeswoman.

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