



# Strict rules key to sustainable transportation, climate policy expert says

‘Very hard to put the carbon genie back in the bottle’

[Alyssa Sporrer](#)

Monday, April 19, 2021

FreightWaves recently chatted with Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Transport Campaign, to learn about how transportation-related climate change policy works.

After law school, Becker fought to pass legislation such as the Clean Air Act, California’s vehicular emissions law, AB 1493, President Barack Obama’s clean car standards and the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) [Superfund](#) program for cleaning up toxic waste in places such as Love Canal.

Becker ran the global warming and energy program and worked on CAFE standards at the Sierra Club for 18 years. He has also worked with several small environmental groups. In 2007, Becker started the Safe Climate Campaign and then joined the Center for Biological Diversity in 2020.

“I’m pretty much doing what I’ve done since 1989 when I worked at Sierra Club — cars and climate,” Becker said.

*This question-and-answer interview was edited for clarity and length.*

**FREIGHTWAVES: What major challenges do transportation-related climate policies face?**

**BECKER:** “One is the [politics](#), and the second is the auto companies. The first problem is that Republican government officials denied a problem, even though one-quarter of Republican voters say [climate change is] a big problem we’ve got to do something about, according to polls.

“When the oil industry essentially became the chief funder of the Republican Party, virtually all of the Republicans decided to deny the problem and thereby not have to work on a solution that would result in using less oil.

“The other [problem] is the industry. The auto companies said in my earlier career, ‘We can’t make cars with seat belts. We’ll just go out of business. We can’t make cars with airbags. It’s impossible. ... We can’t make cars go 27.5 miles per gallon,’ which was the first CAFE standard.

“Companies don’t want to face up to the fact that they are putting their children’s future in jeopardy. It’s very hard to put the carbon genie back in the bottle when you deal with a pollutant that has a very long lifetime of 100 years or more. Once it’s out, it’s very hard to control.

“For every gallon of gasoline burned, 25 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> is pumped into the atmosphere. A gallon of gas weighs 7 pounds, and when you burn it, you treble its molecular weight. So the 7 becomes over 20 pounds. But then you have to add the roughly 5 pounds of upstream emissions associated with the extraction, refining and transportation of the fuel to get to the gas tank.”

**FREIGHTWAVES: Throughout your career, have you seen individuals and companies shift their attitudes toward making [environmental progress](#)?**

**BECKER:** “Companies? Not very much. There are a few companies like Tesla that get it and are putting pressure on big companies. But the government is going to have to step in here. The auto companies know how to make progress. Their engineers are among the best in the world, but they just don’t want to put the technology on the vehicles.

“The progress that has been made is on the technology side. Batteries are falling in price and increasing in efficiency. Studies from UC Davis to Bloomberg have projected that it will be cheaper to buy an electric car by 2025 to 2028 than it will be to buy a gasoline-powered vehicle.

“The American people are beginning to get it. The fact that Tesla has been so successful has certainly alerted Wall Street that, ‘Hey, there’s profit to be made here.’”

**FREIGHTWAVES: How did you get involved with climate change and cars?**

**BECKER:** “I was working on the Clean Air Act in the late 1980s and reading the latest scientific developments, and it seemed pretty disturbing that this issue of global warming was not being addressed by any major political entities.

“Very quickly, it was clear that two-thirds of [emissions in the U.S.](#) come out of vehicles and power plants. I couldn’t figure out a way to win the fight on power plants because of the political ramifications and the fact that there are power plants in every single state. But I could see a way forward on cars.

“I thought it would take five years or so. It ended up taking 25 years, but we won a huge victory. The clean car standards that Obama negotiated with the auto companies represented the biggest single step any nation has ever taken to address global warming.

“Six gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> savings is what those standards would have achieved if the auto companies had [honored] their commitment and not told Trump to overturn the deal that they had negotiated with Obama.

“Now, with Biden saying that he recognizes that global warming represents an existential threat, maybe we can make the kind of progress that’s commensurate with the challenge.”

**FREIGHTWAVES: What are the most important next steps for sustainable road freight and transportation?**

**BECKER:** “Rules — strict rules that are permanent. They need to be tough governmental rules that auto companies actually follow and don’t cheat on.

“The short-term standard needs to be basically a replacement of the Obama rules ... until the EPA can develop longer-term rules for 2030 and beyond that are much more aggressive.

“The Obama rules from 2012 were a roughly 5% annual improvement in emissions. That probably should go up to about 7% for gas-powered vehicles until 2030 when gas-powered vehicle sales should phase out for light-duty. Electric vehicles will be cheaper, in most cases, than gasoline vehicles, to buy and run.

“It [2030] is an important date because the scientists have said that by 2050, the on-road, light-duty fleet needs to emit zero emissions in order to protect the climate. Many vehicles last 20 years or more, so you have to start phasing them out 20 years before 2050, which is 2030. Trucks take a little longer [to transition to electric] — maybe 2040.”

<https://www.freightwaves.com/news/strict-rules-key-to-sustainable-transportation-climate-policy-expert-says>