

Electric trash pickup in California? Not for years, as waste companies sidestep rules

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That garbage truck you hear lurching through your neighborhood first thing in the morning? It runs on natural gas or diesel, dirtying the air with nitrogen oxides and contributing to carbon emissions that worsen climate change.

Combustion trash trucks, with their short and fixed routes, are prime candidates for speedy conversion to electric. The resulting zero-emission

waste collection would improve local air quality, especially in communities already burdened by industrial pollution.

But new California rules governing big rigs could keep trash trucks from going all-electric until 2042. The exemption is a boon to waste companies that spent the last decade investing in [natural gas](#), mainly methane extracted from the ground.

Natural gas was initially considered an alternative to diesel, but scientific evidence over the last decade showed it produces higher-than-advertised emissions. Continuing to use it, researchers warn, will stall air quality improvements and delay the transition to zero.

"We're basically carving out exemptions because of political protest from people who made bad investments," said Sasan Saadat, policy analyst for the environmental organization Earth Justice. "You'll end up in this absurd situation where vehicles ready to go electric at a fast pace will be put on the slowest timetable in communities most overdue for relief."

The California Air Resources Board (CARB) will soon decide on a rule that would require most new heavy duty trucks to be zero-emission by 2036. Called Advanced Clean Fleets, the policy would affect everything from Amazon delivery vans to trucks delivering goods from major ports.

The policy, set for an April vote, is part of California's broader effort to fight [climate change](#) by reducing [greenhouse gas emissions](#) and air contamination. Some big rigs could begin phasing in electric as early as 2024, but not the garbage and sewage trucks clambering down California streets.

Industry influence

Months ago, CARB proposed to extend the zero-emission deadline for some 200 garbage trucks that run on renewable gas, methane extracted from decomposing garbage or sewage and considered renewable. But after pressure from waste companies and the natural gas industry, that exemption grew last month to around 10,000 conventional combustion trucks.

That larger group will receive leeway via another state program, the Low Carbon Fuel Standard. Companies don't physically fuel these 10,000 trucks with renewable gas. Instead they use a "book and claim" crediting system to purchase renewable gas in other states and then claim the combustion trucks as clean.

The estimated 6,000 trash trucks in the state that still run on diesel won't get a pass. But under this expanded extension, owners of all natural gas garbage and wastewater trucks in California won't have to begin electrifying until 2030 and finish by 2042—six years behind the timeline of other big rigs.

The waste and natural gas industries pushed for this exemption, citing the investments they made in natural gas as a cleaner alternative to diesel. Among the loudest voices has been Waste Management, the Texas-based giant that reported revenues of \$19.7 billion last year.

In a letter to the board, Waste Management's director of government affairs Alex Oseguera requested revisions to the ruling that would acknowledge \$2.5 billion that the company invested in natural gas vehicles and \$550 million in California fueling infrastructure.

"Although WM supports the state's long-term goal of electrifying the [transportation sector](#), we believe that the final rule should be revised to consider and give credit to the large investments already made," she said in the letter.

Several waste companies, including Waste Management, declined or did not respond to requests for further comment.

Tony Brasil, a branch head in CARB's transportation and clean technology division, said that when the agency amended the exemption to include all 10,000 natural gas garbage trucks, it was attempting to balance industry complaints and avoid increasing rates for trash hauling services while achieving greenhouse gas reductions.

"I think the board basically said yeah, we do recognize this is a lot of investment at the same time and in early days, so giving a little more time is probably okay. And again, we're not giving time for any of the diesel trucks that they have," he said. "At the end of the day, it is a give."

Patricio Portillo, a transportation analyst for the Climate and Clean Energy Program at the Natural Resource Defense Council, said CARB's attempt to walk a fine line by offering an extended timeline was a misguided decision. A coalition of other environmental and public health organizations agreed.

"Because there was willingness from the board to budge, all of the other groups that care about natural gas have jumped onboard and pushed to expand that exemption," Portillo said. "Waste trucks are one of the best suited types of vehicles for electrification... It's all just really unfortunate that the timeline for electrifying them could get slowed down."

Clean then, dirty now

California has a uniquely large natural gas transportation industry, mostly because of state laws that encouraged its proliferation. It's the product of a bygone era of environmental activism, one that promoted natural gas as a cleaner alternative to diesel.

But the majority of peer-reviewed research over the last decade concluded natural gas vehicles emit particulate matter and [nitrogen oxides](#) that contribute to health problems, and expanding natural gas infrastructure risks delaying a transition to renewable energy.

Following the research, activists in communities burdened by pollution have since switched to calls for zero-emission vehicles and argue that fueling transportation with natural gas is a step to skip over on the road to zero-emissions.

"Frontline groups in the Inland Empire, in Los Angeles, in the San Joaquin Valley and elsewhere have a lot of fear about natural gas infrastructure being put in. They're very worried about their health," said Andrea Vidaurre, senior policy analyst at the People's Collective for Environmental Justice.

As other states consider regulations, [environmental groups](#) across the country have accused waste companies of "greenwashing" the natural gas industry, or using deceptive marketing to imply that their products or policies are more environmentally friendly than they actually are.

Recent ads on national news websites claimed natural gas is "the best way to reach climate goals faster and power our future cleanly, reliably, and affordably." But an analysis by climate newsletter HEATED found that "independent" studies cited by the ads were published by organizations with significant ties to the fossil fuel industry.

Nicole Rice, a spokesperson for the California Renewable Transportation Alliance, a group backed by Chevron and SoCal Gas, said natural gas is a reasonable alternative when zero emission trucks aren't commercially available at scale. The group recently rebranded from its original name, the California Natural Gas Vehicle Coalition.

"[CARB] should allow for an exemption to the mandate to purchase zero emission trucks and allow the purchase of internal combustion engines and prioritize the use of the cleanest available technology," she said.

"Today, that is low [nitrogen oxide] trucks powered by renewable natural gas."

Stickers on garbage trucks that say "clean" may give off an environmentally friendly veneer, said Adrian Martinez, deputy managing attorney at Earth Justice in California, but there's gunk he wouldn't want to breathe coming out the tailpipe.

Martinez pushed for natural gas as a cleaner alternative to diesel a decade ago. But he said the science is now clear: transitioning to zero-emissions as quickly as possible will help us attain ambitious air quality standards, even if it means a couple more years of diesel.

"Zero-emissions is finally prevailing as the preferred approach. But we still have legacy issues, and these industries that are still addicted to methane burning trucks and are pushing to keep them," he said. "We don't have the luxury to keep burning stuff in our vehicles."

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