

California releases proposed 2022 building code update

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Starting in 2022, at least one appliance for heating in most new California homes and buildings will likely be powered with electricity, rather than gas, according to a draft rule released this afternoon by the California Energy Commission.

The code is thought to be first in the country to make heat pumps the baseline technology for a building code. It also increases ventilation standards for gas stoves as concern about the health dangers of burning gas indoors grows. Advocates say these measures will have climate and air quality benefits, but fall short of the all-electric building code that more than 200 stakeholders and advocates in California have requested.

The release of the draft rule comes on the same day that the United Nations released a landmark report calling for an urgent cut in global methane emissions and warning that expanding the use of fossil gas is incompatible with limiting global temperature increases to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Polling from FM3 released on Wednesday highlights that Californians, too, are feeling the urgency of the climate crisis, with two thirds of voters saying the state should be moving more quickly to address climate change.

A study from Harvard University on Wednesday found that burning gas is now the leading cause of premature death in 19 states, and that outdoor air pollution from burning gas in buildings cost California \$2.3 billion in 2017 alone.

Attention is now likely to turn out California's 2025 code, as analysis from Energy Innovation has found that meeting the Biden administration's climate target of cutting climate pollution 50% by 2030 would require that new construction across the nation be all-electric from 2025. Building without gas delivers considerable cost savings for developers and residents.

The following experts released statements in response to the proposed code:

"The 2022 code update is a step in the right direction, but with the health and prosperity of millions of Californians hanging in the balance, we can no longer be satisfied with incremental progress. California is still expanding the gas system more quickly than any other state in the nation, even as the U.N. this week highlights that that expansion is incompatible with a habitable planet. We need to strengthen this code and need a solid commitment from policymakers for pollution-free buildings in 2025, or California risks being a major barrier to national emissions reduction goals."

Matt Vespa, staff attorney, Earthjustice

"California's proposed building code update is a step in the right direction, but it doesn't go far enough to cut the pollution from gas appliances that is fueling the climate crisis. New findings from Harvard University show that air pollution from buildings in California cut short 1,500 lives and cost \$17 billion dollars in 2017. We have the option to build pollution-free homes that are healthier and more affordable, and we should take it. We're disappointed it didn't happen this code cycle. It absolutely must happen in the next."

Matt Gough, senior campaign representative, Sierra Club's My Generation campaign

"While the CEC's proposal is an important step forward to reduce pollution from buildings, California needs to do more. We know that all-electric buildings are cheaper. We know they are healthier. Meanwhile, every new gas building in the state locks us into decades of emissions and wasted infrastructure costs. Delaying all-electric construction is a mistake. The CEC needs to commit publicly to going all-electric in the next code cycle, so that the state can stop expanding the use of expensive and dangerous fossil gas."

Denise Grab, manager on RMI's Carbon-Free Buildings team

"The BDC applauds these groundbreaking and necessary improvements; indeed, they represent the first—not final—step towards a resilient, reliable and carbon free California. The State's leadership must build on this momentum by moving quickly to implement an all-electric building code, stopping the expansion of fossil gas infrastructure and guaranteeing equity is at the forefront of our clean energy transition."

Jose Torres, California state director, Building Decarbonization Coalition

"We're in a climate emergency. Burning fossil fuels is the cause, so we should stop putting them in buildings. This is especially true when it is cheaper and healthier to live in buildings without them. It should be a no-brainer. The CEC should go all-electric now, but at the very least it should commit to going all-electric in 2025."

Jonny Kocher, associate, RMI's Carbon-Free Buildings team

