About this series

California’s Jobs and Climate Action Plan for 2030 provides concrete recommendations that can be applied in other states and the nation to ensure that workers are supported as policies to meet stringent greenhouse gas emissions reductions are implemented. It is premised on the value of a high-road economy, in which businesses pay the wages and benefits necessary to attract and retain skilled workers, who in turn perform high-quality work.

The Action Plan identifies specific complementary labor policies that can be incorporated into climate policies to generate family-supporting jobs and career pathways for disadvantaged workers. It then shows how training investments can deliver the skills required to perform these high-quality jobs and broaden access for all workers. It also provides recommendations on the transition for workers in declining industries to comparable livelihoods if jobs are lost.

Briefs in this series summarize the recommendations for some of the critical climate sectors addressed in the Action Plan: electricity generation, energy efficiency, electric vehicle manufacturing and charging infrastructure, public transit and infill development, trucking, and waste.

Role of waste in climate action

Waste accounts for 2% of greenhouse gas emissions both in California and nationally. The waste sector’s most significant impact on the climate is from the release of methane, a more potent global warming gas than CO2. Methane is emitted from organic waste that decomposes in landfills. Per capita landfill disposal has not decreased since 2009 in California or nationally.

An essential component of California’s strategy to reduce methane emissions is the requirement that local jurisdictions divert at least 75% of all organic waste from landfills. California invests public resources from the state’s greenhouse gas reduction fund to help local jurisdictions meet diversion and emissions reductions targets.
Ensuring that policies to reduce emissions from waste create family-supporting jobs in middle-class careers

Meeting the state's and nation's waste diversion targets could contribute to significant job creation, particularly in waste processing. For example, California's recycling agency estimates that composting creates an average of four jobs for every 1,000 tons of material diverted, approximately four times more than landfilling.

Waste management is an essential public service. Historically, waste workers employed by a public entity and/or those who are members of a union have had the ability to make gains in working conditions and pay. Median hourly wages for garbage collectors (who drive or work on garbage trucks) are still relatively good; many garbage collectors are represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and are likely to receive family health insurance benefits and pensions. However, in recent decades waste management has been outsourced to contractors, or in some cases completely privatized with minimal oversight. Public-sector workers now account for only 1.6% of the waste sector workforce in California. Low-road employment practices are common in the private waste hauling industry, including insufficient training, dangerous working conditions, long and inconsistent shifts, and wage theft.

Waste processing jobs are relatively new, created in response to diversion efforts that began in 1989 in California. Waste processors and sorters have much lower wages than garbage collectors, and are almost entirely non-union in California. Processing jobs are the segment of the waste industry that is most likely to grow under state mandates. These are low-road jobs, and are likely to continue to be so unless labor standards are incorporated into waste diversion programs and mandates.

Research suggests that contractors that use low-road labor practices also cut corners on compliance with environmental mandates. These race-to-the-bottom practices thrive where local governments fail to manage the waste industry sufficiently, either using lowest bid contracting methods that do not consider environmental and economic development benefits in their contracting decisions, or fully privatizing the service through an open-market system. Regaining control of contracts and adding requirements that address both climate imperatives and good labor practices is essential for restructuring the waste management industry and internalizing its social and environmental costs.

Case study: improved waste diversion and better jobs in Los Angeles

Several municipalities have improved employment and environmental outcomes in this sector by structuring the government contracting process in ways that lead to high-quality careers and increased access for disadvantaged workers. The Los Angeles City Council instituted a new exclusive contracting policy in 2016 for commercial waste, with the explicit dual objective of improving waste diversion and creating better job outcomes for local waste workers. The new contract requirements include streamlined truck routes, guaranteed recycling and waste tracking, standardized rates, and cleaned bins. The policy also requires city contractors to comply with a series of worker protection ordinances that the city council passed to ensure positive worker outcomes for contracted out city services. These best practices can be incentivized by climate policy.
Key recommendations for waste

Job Quality Policies: to ensure family-supporting jobs and access for disadvantaged workers

- Use insourcing or exclusive franchise contracting models to support labor and environmental standards for waste services.
- Provide technical assistance to municipal waste agencies on how to apply responsible procurement policies. Provide model contract language with best practice workforce policy levers and diversion enforcement.
- Explore options to address rate increases for waste services due to climate mandates.
- Use job impact metrics to measure the impact of waste incentive and investment programs on quantity of jobs, job quality, and job access.

Workforce Training Strategies: to prepare current and future workers and provide needed skills to employers

- Support the development of high-road industry training partnerships for contractors of municipal waste services. Partnerships should include incumbent worker training and should create pipelines for the inclusion and advancement of disadvantaged workers.
- Implement training programs only where family-supporting jobs have been created.
- Track training program outcomes for graduation rates, attainment of industry-recognized credentials, job placement, retention, wages, and wage progression.

The report “Putting California on the High Road: A Jobs and Climate Action Plan for 2030” offers a vision and plan for integrating economic and workforce development into major climate policies and programs to help achieve California’s major climate goals: achieving 2030 greenhouse gas emission reduction targets and transitioning to a carbon neutral economy by 2045. It was prepared by the UC Berkeley Labor Center and lead author Carol Zabin, and was submitted by the California Workforce Development Board to the state legislature in September 2020.

View the full report along with briefs in this series at: https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/putting-california-on-the-high-road-a-jobs-and-climate-action-plan-for-2030/.