

Following a dismal global climate report, could Massachusetts push up its net-zero goal?

By [Sabrina Shankman](#) and [Emma Platoff](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 21, 2023, 43 minutes ago



Trying to switch the state away from oil and other fossil fuels by 2050 is already a daunting prospect for Massachusetts. 2040 would be even harder. ROBERT F. BUKATY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

INTO THE RED: Climate and the fight of our lives

An alarming new report on climate change, which prompted the UN secretary general to urge developed nations to move up the target for largely ending the use of fossil

fuels by a full decade, raises a difficult question for Massachusetts, already ahead of most states on climate policy.

Is it even possible to move faster?

Several state policy makers, legislators, and others who helped shape Massachusetts' climate targets said that moving the deadline could force a daunting if not prohibitive redo of untold amounts of work that took years to achieve. One lawmaker central to the state's landmark climate laws, Senator Michael Barrett, said the state could also risk a popular backlash against climate policies perceived as liberal if they were suddenly shifted into significantly higher gear.

"I'm not interested in freaking people out and forcing them to the right," Barrett said, though he said the state needs to increase the urgency of its response. "My job is to figure out how to really see climate policies succeed, and sometimes that can be complicated."

On Monday, as he announced the release of the most recent UN report on climate change, Secretary General António Guterres called on developed nations to achieve net-zero emissions by as close to 2040 as possible. Like many states and countries, Massachusetts for years has been working toward a deadline of 2050, a date that grew out of international agreements to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. Some pointed out that moving the deadline forward to 2040 would leave just 17 years to convert some 2 million homes in Massachusetts to fossil-fuel-free heat, swap gasoline cars for electric vehicles (and get many off the road entirely), and change the state's sources of electricity — transitions that Massachusetts is already lagging on.

Despite such worries, some advocates and lawmakers said the state should seize the moment to think about what might be possible.

"It's overdue for Massachusetts to set some more ambitious targets," said Ben

Hellerstein, the state director of the advocacy group Environment Massachusetts. “Hopefully this announcement from the UN will help to catalyze the conversation around that.”

Massachusetts adopted its net-zero-by-2050 target in 2021 in part because of a similarly dire report from UN climate scientists in 2018, which had warned that unless global emissions got to net-zero by the half-century mark, the planet was doomed to blow past 1.5 degrees of warming, considered a key climate threshold.

After the release of that report, Beacon Hill was “pressured to have bold climate action, and they rallied around that concept,” said Cabell Eames, political director for the climate organization 350 Mass & Better Future Project.

“While it was challenging behind closed doors, it did end up happening,” Eames said. “So now that you have a new [UN report] with a new executive branch, I think you’re going to see movement.”

Liberal Democrats in both branches of the Legislature — Representative Erica Uterhoeven and Senator Jamie Eldridge — said they want the state to at least consider the call from Guterres. “When you look at Massachusetts, we are a state in one of the richest countries in the world and within one of the richest countries in the world, we’re one of the richest states,” said Uterhoeven. “So there’s really no excuse for us to not take bold climate action and really be a leader in this issue.”

But so far, at least, Massachusetts political leaders have given no indication they intend to set more ambitious targets in response to the report. Indeed, the issue appeared so politically sensitive that several people who had worked on climate policy in the state declined to speak openly, saying that any answer to the question of moving up the deadline might trigger repercussions.

Governor Maura Healey’s new climate chief, Melissa Hoffer, and Energy and

Environment Administration Secretary Rebecca Tepper both issued statements in response to Globe questions, acknowledging the urgency of the moment and noting the work the Healey administration is doing to respond to the climate crisis. Neither addressed questions about shifting the 2050 deadline.

A spokesperson for the department of energy and environmental affairs noted the long time it took to get Massachusetts to its current plan. Since the 2050 target was adopted, the state has been planning at all levels, examining what sub-targets to set, such as the number of heat pumps or EVs needed by certain times, and how to transition the state off natural gas.

The blueprint for reaching the goals — called the Clean Energy and Climate Plans — were the result of three years of rigorous analysis and engagement with state agencies, regional authorities, and residents, including more than 1,400 public comments.

It is just now, some legislators and advocates said, that the actual work of slashing emissions and achieving those goals can begin.

“We’ve spent enough time in Massachusetts planning and revising plans and right now, we just need to sprint on implementation of the plans that we have,” said Caitlin Peale Sloan, the Conservation Law Foundation’s vice president for Massachusetts. Once that’s begun, she said, then the state should take a look at updates in climate science and warning signs to consider if its target should change.

One former official involved in previous target-setting efforts cautioned that every time Massachusetts has revisited its climate targets, it has taken roughly two years of planning and negotiating.

And Barrett, who helped write the state’s 2021 and 2022 climate laws, said the latest warnings from the UN mean Massachusetts must “do what we’re already doing but faster — getting our homes off heating oil and natural gas, our cars off gasoline, and

the electric grid off fossil fuels.”

But he cautioned that taking too apocalyptic a stance on climate could alienate key voting demographics.

Larry Chretien, executive director of the nonprofit Green Energy Consumers Alliance, said he’s not optimistic the state will move its net-zero goal to 2040, but is hopeful “policy makers will actually implement the policies needed to get to whatever goal we have.”

”As much as I want to see that date moved . . . what I really want to see are the actual policies that get us to those big numbers,” Chretien said.

Still, the latest UN report is hard to ignore, said Ben Downing, a former state senator and current executive at The Engine, a venture capital firm that invests in climate tech. “I don’t know how you can look at that report and say you care deeply about climate and say that where we are and the path that we’re on is good enough,” he said.

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