ISSN NO: 2769-996X
October 2025

Title: The purpose of California's Environmental Law in the Climate Era

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Abstract
This article clarifies a single, practical purpose for California's climate era: **to convert ambitious targets into reliable, equitable delivery**—clean electricity and the grid to carry it, low-carbon mobility and housing options, safe water and coasts, and climate-ready neighborhoods—on timelines that match the science. The argument is constructive and human: California already has the core authorities; the work now is to align them around one North Star—**build clean, build fair, build fast**—so plans become projects and projects become outcomes at scale. The paper synthesizes how statutory targets (AB 32, SB 32, SB 100), planning instruments (Scoping Plans), and cornerstone laws (CEQA, SGMA) can be coordinated with programmatic review, time-certain processes, and public metrics to achieve dependable implementation without adding new mandates.[1]
Keywords: California climate law; purpose; implementation; AB 32; SB 32; SB 100; CEQA; SGMA; permitting; transmission; equity

Introduction

California's climate policy is no longer a contest to announce the boldest goal; it is a test of delivery. The question that matters now is simple and practical: how do existing laws translate into clean power on the grid, cleaner ways to move and live, reliable water, prepared coasts, and neighborhoods that stay healthy during hotter summers and longer fire seasons? This article takes that question as its starting point and treats California's environmental law as a system designed to turn commitments into outcomes people can see and feel.

The central purpose I advance is straightforward: align the tools we already have to build clean, build fair, and build fast. "Build clean" focuses the state's attention on zero-carbon electricity, storage, and the transmission that ties it together, along with efficient buildings and everyday mobility options that reduce long car trips. "Build fair" ensures the transition delivers early, tangible benefits—cleaner air, safer housing, and lower energy burdens—especially in communities that have carried the greatest environmental and health risks. "Build fast" means predictable, deadline-bound processes and standardized analyses that move good projects from plan to operation without sacrificing meaningful environmental review or public participation.

Rather than proposing new statutory mandates, this article shows how the current framework can be organized around that purpose. The state already possesses clear targets, planning instruments, and review procedures; the task is to coordinate them so agencies, utilities, local governments, and community partners are working from a common playbook with shared milestones and transparent metrics. When purpose leads, rules, budgets, and projects line up more naturally—and progress becomes easier to measure and easier to trust.

The pages that follow are deliberately practical. They outline how power system planning and procurement can be tied to near-term delivery, how transportation and land use can make low-carbon choices the convenient default, how adaptation can scale proven measures for heat, wildfire, coasts, and water, and how equity can be embedded as a way of building rather than a separate program. The aim is not to critique the past but to clarify the work of the present: use the tools at hand to deliver outcomes on time, and do so in a way that shares benefits widely across California.

A North Star: Build Clean, Build Fair, Build Fast

Build clean is about the practical work of the energy transition—deploying carbon-free electricity, storage, and the wires to connect them; improving building efficiency; and giving people low-carbon ways to get

[1] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2020). *California greenhouse gas emissions inventory: 2000–2018*. Sacramento, CA: CARB).
California Legislature. (2006). *Assembly Bill 32 (Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006)*, Stats. 2006, ch. 488; Cal. Health & Safety Code §§ 38500–38599

ISSN NO: 2769-996X
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around. **Build fair** means communities that have carried disproportionate heat, smoke, and pollution see early benefits—cleaner air, lower energy burdens, safer housing, and reliable water. **Build fast** means predictable, time-certain processes that keep strong environmental review but move climate-beneficial projects from plan to operation on schedule. None of this demands brand-new law; it asks us to use the statutes on the books with purpose.

The Legal Architecture

California's core climate statutes already point in the same direction if we read them through the lens of purpose:

- **AB 32 (2006)** established a statewide greenhouse gas program, anchoring action in inventories, Scoping Plans, and enforceable rules—turning climate goals into administrative work plans.[2]
- **SB 32 (2016)** sharpened the trajectory (40% below 1990 by 2030), giving agencies a clear destination and timeline to plan against.[3]
- **SB 100 (2018)** set the electricity end-state (100% carbon-free by 2045) and guides procurement and transmission planning toward that outcome.[4]
- **Scoping Plans** coordinate sectors—power, fuels, industry, buildings, and transport—so rules add up to the statewide pathway rather than pulling in different directions.[5]
- **CEQA** remains the engine of "look-before-you-leap" analysis—impacts, alternatives, and mitigation—with tools for program-level review and standardized methods that support both rigor and speed.[6]
- **SGMA (2014)** adds climate resilience to water governance by requiring local sustainability plans that protect supplies through drought and recharge opportunities when it rains.[7]
- **SB 375 (2008)** links regional transportation plans to housing and land-use strategies, making it easier to approve homes near jobs and transit so people can drive less.[8]

Read together, these tools make a purpose-driven system: we set clear targets, plan the path, review impacts transparently, and deliver projects that match the plan.

Power System Delivery: Turning Targets into Megawatts

The heart of "build clean" is the grid. California's purpose here is simple: **get enough clean capacity and transmission online, on time**. That means three practical moves:

1. **Plan the portfolio, then buy it.** Use Scoping Plans and resource proceedings to set near-term milestones for renewables, storage (including long-duration), and firm clean resources—then lock them in with clear procurement schedules so projects can reach financing and construction.[9]
2. **Make transmission predictable.** Identify preferred corridors early, pre-package common mitigation, and run programmatic environmental review so individual lines can proceed with fewer surprises while maintaining strong analysis.[10]

[2] California Legislature. (2006). *Assembly Bill 32 (Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006)*, Stats. 2006, ch. 488; Cal. Health & Safety Code §§ 38500–38599

[3] California Legislature. (2016). *Senate Bill 32 (Pavley)*, Stats. 2016, ch. 249; Cal. Health & Safety Code § 38566

[4] California Legislature. (2018). *Senate Bill 100 (De León): The 100 Percent Clean Energy Act of 2018*, Stats. 2018, ch. 312; Cal. Pub. Utilities Code § 399.11 et seq.

[5] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2017). *The 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan: The strategy for achieving California's 2030 GHG target*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[6] Selmi, D. (2004). The California Environmental Quality Act: Judicial reform or legislative gridlock? *Ecology Law Quarterly, 31*(1), 71–121

[7] California Department of Water Resources (DWR). (2015). *Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) 2014: Summary and implementation guidance*. Sacramento, CA: DWR

[8] California Legislature. (2008). *Senate Bill 375 (Steinberg): Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act*, Stats. 2008, ch. 728; Cal. Gov. Code § 65080(b)(2)(B)

[9] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2017). *The 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan: The strategy for achieving California's 2030 GHG target*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[10] California Legislature. (2018). *Senate Bill 100 (De León)*, Stats. 2018, ch. 312; Cal. Pub. Utilities Code § 399.11 et seq.

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3. **Measure what matters.** Publish public dashboards—megawatts contracted, interconnection milestones, miles of line energized—so everyone can see if we're on pace and adjust quickly if we're not.[11]

These actions don't weaken environmental review; instead, they organize it in a way that allows straightforward projects that follow established patterns to proceed steadily from planning to operation, providing clear communication for both communities and developers.

Transportation and Land Use: Low-Carbon Mobility People Actually Use

Transportation is where most Californians feel climate policy every day. A purpose-first approach focuses on **choices that are easy and attractive**:

- **Cleaner vehicles and fuels** continue to lower tailpipe and lifecycle emissions, expanding zero-emission options across price points and vehicle types.[12]
- **Infill and transit** bring homes, jobs, schools, and services closer together so short trips become normal and long commutes optional. SB 375 gives regions the structure to align transportation dollars and housing approvals with this vision.[13]
- **By-right pathways near transit** allow well-planned infill to move with standardized analyses, while community benefits (like safer crossings, shade, and local hiring) are built into approvals.[14]

The purpose is not to tell people what to do; it is to **make the clean, convenient option the obvious one**—quicker bus service, reliable trains, safe walking and biking, and homes where daily life fits into shorter trips.

Adaptation and Community Safety: Living Well in a Changing Climate

Californians need neighborhoods that stay safe and livable as conditions change. The state already has a playbook; the job now is to apply it consistently and visibly:

- **Heat and health.** Cities and counties can use adaptation guidance to expand cooling access, plant urban shade, and protect outdoor workers during heat waves, tying funding to measurable reductions in heat illness.[15]
- **Wildfire resilience.** Scale prescribed fire, harden structures in the wildland–urban interface, and plan evacuation and communications with the same focus we bring to grid reliability—because safety is the purpose.[16]
- **Coastal preparedness.** Use sea-level-rise scenarios to guide siting and design, prefer nature-based protection where it works, and maintain public access as a core value along with safety and infrastructure reliability.[17]
- **Groundwater reliability.** SGMA's local sustainability plans protect domestic wells, farms, and ecosystems, reducing subsidence and strengthening drought resilience through recharge and better accounting.[18]

Purpose shows up here as **everyday confidence**: the power stays on during heat; smoke days are fewer and safer; coastal roads and wastewater plants plan ahead; and wells don't go dry.

Equity by Design: Making the Benefits Show Up Early

A purpose that forgets equity will miss people. A purpose that **starts** with equity will build momentum. Three practices make the difference:

[11] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2020). *California greenhouse gas emissions inventory: 2000–2018*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[12] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2017). *The 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[13] California Legislature. (2008). *Senate Bill 375 (Steinberg)*, Stats. 2008, ch. 728; Cal. Gov. Code § 65080(b)(2)(B)

[14] Selmi, D. (2004). *Ecology Law Quarterly, 31*(1), 71–121

[15] California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA). (2018). *Safeguarding California Plan: 2018 update*. Sacramento, CA: CNRA

[16] California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). (2021). *2020 Fire Siege: Report*. Sacramento, CA: CAL FIRE

[17] California Coastal Commission. (2018). *Sea level rise policy guidance: 2018 update*. San Francisco, CA: California Coastal Commission

[18] California Department of Water Resources (DWR). (2015). *Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) 2014: Summary and implementation guidance*. Sacramento, CA: DWR

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1. **Prioritize delivery in communities that need it most.** Direct early investments toward neighborhoods with high heat exposure, poor air quality, and high energy burdens so benefits arrive where they matter first.[19]
2. **Pair climate projects with local health gains.** Clean buses, truck charging, and building upgrades reduce both greenhouse gases and local pollutants—link approvals to these co-benefits with clear metrics.[20]
3. **Make participation easy and practical.** Plain-language materials, translation, evening meetings, and community benefit agreements improve projects and trust—speed follows clarity.

Equity is not a separate track; it is the **way** we build, so communities see the purpose in action.

Administrative Tools that Keep Everyone on Purpose

California's administrative playbook can be tuned for delivery:

- **Scoping Plans as roadmaps** with concrete near-term builds, not just 2030/2045 endpoints.[21]
- **Standardized analyses** for recurring clean projects (e.g., solar-plus-storage, EV charging depots) that preserve thorough environmental review while cutting duplication.[22]
- **Time-certain processes** so agencies, utilities, developers, and communities can plan workforces and budgets with confidence.[23]
- **Public progress metrics**—MW built, miles of transmission energized, homes near transit, shade trees planted, cooling centers opened—posted on a single site people actually use.[24]

These are simple, human moves that keep effort aligned with purpose.

Federal–State Backdrop: Space to Lead, Room to Deliver

California's long track record with vehicle standards and multi-state partnerships shows how state leadership fits in a federal system and spreads through networks, giving purpose practical reach.[25]

Conclusion

California's climate era is no longer defined by the drafting of new goals; it is defined by the steady conversion of existing goals into outcomes that people can see and feel. The central purpose of the state's environmental law is therefore practical: to make clean energy, clean mobility, reliable water, and climate-safe neighborhoods real, on timelines that match the risks communities face. The pathway is not mysterious. It runs through institutions and statutes the state already has, and it succeeds when those tools are aligned to one simple rule of decision: build clean, build fair, build fast.

"Build clean" means treating zero-carbon electricity, storage, and transmission as essential public infrastructure and managing them with the same discipline used for public health and safety. It asks planners to translate long-term targets into short, dated milestones; to procure what the grid actually needs; and to treat interconnection and transmission as enabling infrastructure, not afterthoughts. It favors programmatic analysis for recurring project types so environmental review remains rigorous without being repetitious. And it values measurement: megawatts added, miles of line energized, hours of storage available when heat pushes the system to its limits.

"Build fair" means the transition shows up first where the need is greatest. Communities facing the highest heat exposure, the most wildfire smoke, and the least access to affordable energy should see early benefits—cooling access, cleaner buses and trucks, home upgrades that lower bills, safer housing near transit, and reliable water supplies. Equity is not a separate program; it is a way of building. That principle translates into

[19] California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA). (2018). *Safeguarding California Plan: 2018 update*. Sacramento, CA: CNRA

[20] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2017). *The 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[21] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2017). *The 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[22] Selmi, D. (2004). *Ecology Law Quarterly, 31*(1), 71–121

[23] California Legislature. (2018). *Senate Bill 100 (De León)*, Stats. 2018, ch. 312; Cal. Pub. Utilities Code § 399.11 et seq.

[24] California Air Resources Board (CARB). (2020). *California greenhouse gas emissions inventory: 2000–2018*. Sacramento, CA: CARB

[25] Carlson, A. (2019). *Federalism, climate change, and the Clean Air Act. UCLA Journal of Environmental Law & Policy*, 37(1), 45–67

ISSN NO: 2769-996X
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concrete practices: community benefits written into approvals, local hiring and training for the clean-energy workforce, air-quality improvements paired with climate investments, and plain-language engagement that makes it easy to participate. When benefits are visible and near-term, trust grows and projects move.

"Build fast" requires time-certain processes and clear roles. Agencies can set calendars for rulemakings and procurements, standardize analytical methods for common project types, and publish progress dashboards that are simple enough for the public to read at a glance. Local governments can align zoning and infrastructure plans so infill housing near frequent transit becomes the default rather than the exception. Project sponsors can commit early to mitigation packages that are proven to work, shortening negotiation and speeding delivery. None of these steps weakens environmental protection; they make it predictable.

The same purpose-driven approach carries into adaptation. Climate-safe communities are built by scaling the tools already at hand: prescribed fire and home hardening in the wildland–urban interface; heat action plans that deliver shade, cooling, and worker protections; coastal strategies that pair nature-based solutions with reliable infrastructure; and groundwater sustainability plans that protect domestic wells while supporting productive landscapes. Success here looks like fewer crisis days and more ordinary days that feel safe: schools open during heat waves, shorter smoke seasons, roads and treatment plants that keep working when tides run high, and wells that do not run dry in drought.

Delivery at scale is ultimately an administrative craft. It depends on strong records, transparent modeling, clear milestones, and honest progress checks. It rewards teams that design for iteration—tightening rules and shifting pathways as evidence improves—without losing sight of the destination. It also depends on people: planners and engineers who can move projects from concept to construction, community partners who help tailor solutions to local context, and a skilled workforce that sees the transition as a pathway to good jobs. Investing in those capabilities is as important as investing in steel and silicon.

California's experience offers more than a case study; it offers a method. Set targets that reflect the science. Map the path sector by sector. Use environmental review to solve problems early and publicly. Standardize where repetition adds no value. Publish simple indicators that show whether the state is on pace. Keep equity at the center so the transition builds trust as it builds infrastructure. And hold to a shared North Star that helps every participant—agency, utility, city, developer, and resident—choose the option that gets clean projects built, shares benefits fairly, and does both on time.

If the coming decade is measured by what is operating rather than what is promised, California can meet the moment. Lights will stay on during heat because storage and transmission were delivered. Commutes will shrink because homes and transit were built together. Neighborhood air will be cleaner because fleets turned over and buildings were upgraded. Wells will be dependable because aquifers were managed for the long term. These are not abstract aspirations; they are practical results that follow from aligning existing laws with a single purpose. Keep the compass pointed where it belongs—build clean, build fair, build fast—and the outcomes will follow.

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3. California Legislature. (2006). *AB 32* (as above).
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