

Natural gas for homes, businesses in crosshairs

Policymakers look to phase it out

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Northwest News Network

Fossil fuel use in buildings looks to be the next frontier for climate activists at the state and local level. There's a convergence of activity in the Pacific Northwest aimed at phasing out natural gas furnaces and water heaters. Cities from Eugene to Bellingham have teed up bans on natural gas in new commercial buildings. But natural gas has its defenders, too, who have beaten back proposed phase outs before.

Burning fossil fuels in homes and businesses is the second biggest source of global warming pollution in the Northwest, after the transportation sector. That prompted Washington Gov. Jay Inslee to propose an array of new measures on Monday to transition away from natural gas for heating and hot water.

"Climate change is moving faster, and therefore we must move faster," Inslee said at a media event in Olympia. "We have to up our game in the state of Washington against this horrendous threat."

Inslee said to head off future climate-driven disasters society needs to "decarbonize the built environment" — meaning homes, apartment buildings, offices and commercial spaces.

"We know one thing, when you're in a hole, stop digging," Inslee said. "We need to decrease our use of fossil fuels in our buildings. It is clear."

Inslee and Democratic allies in the state Legislature laid out a package of measures whose end goal is to require all-electric appliances for space and water heating. The statewide phase out of natural gas energy would apply to all



New natural gas hookups to commercial buildings and homes are in the crosshairs of policymakers intent on reducing a growing source of carbon emissions.

new construction beginning in 2034.

As proposed, the building electrification requirements do not extend to existing homes and buildings. The governor said he would like to see utilities expand incentives to entice property owners to switch from fossil fuel heating to cleaner electric heating.

The Washington Legislature reconvenes in January to consider this and other climate actions Inslee proposed. In reaction to Inslee's plans, Republicans in the state House said banning gas appliances is a misdirected response to climate concerns.

"The governor's proposal to decarbonize buildings, to get rid of the natural gas industry and retrain workers whose jobs would be eliminated from his policies would do nothing to reduce deadly, destructive wildfires and the smoke they emit," Republican state Rep. Mary Dye said in a prepared statement that keyed off Inslee's opening litany of natu-

ral disasters exacerbated by climate change.

Some Northwest cities are preparing to move much faster than their state governments. The Eugene City Council is out front in Oregon, having taken an initial vote last month to require all new construction to be electric-only beginning in 2023.

Seattle moved first in Washington earlier this year, followed by the suburb of Shoreline and now Bellingham. Under Washington state law, cities only have the authority to ban natural gas heating systems in commercial buildings and apartment blocks. The state building code council is separately working on single family homes and duplexes.

"It really is helpful when we see local governments that are ready to take a first step because that signals there is interest and excitement," Democratic state Rep. Alex Ramel said. "When we see one community do it, and then another community do it and another, we can see dominoes falling

and coming towards us. At the state level, that's something that gives us confidence to move forward and tell our colleagues this is the right idea."

However, the home construction industry and labor unions in the construction and utility sectors are uneasy — if not outright pushing back.

"Natural gas is an affordable way to heat a home," said Jan Himebaugh, government affairs director for the Building Industry Association of Washington. "When you remove that, you further increase the price of living in a home because you're going to all-electrical or whatever it is."

Himebaugh predicted tougher, climate-friendly energy codes will raise home sales prices even more into the unaffordable range. She also raised a separate issue, especially prominent east of the Cascades, of people wanting a natural gas hookup to stay warm during power outages.

"There are many places

across the state that have frigid temperatures in the winter," Himebaugh said. "Removing their ability to have a consistent source of heat if the electric grid goes out should be really concerning to those people and our elected leadership."

Himebaugh said no one wants the government telling them what countertops to put in their kitchen. Likewise, she argued the government should let people make their own choices about gas or electric appliances.

In Bellingham, City Councilor Michael Lilliquist countered that residents are demanding building electrification as a climate change response.

"When local government in conversation with the people we represent decides we need to take strong action on climate change, that's not the government telling the people. That's the government following the will of the people," Lilliquist said.

Lilliquist is pushing an ordinance that would ban natural gas furnaces and gas

water heating in new commercial construction and large apartment buildings beginning later next year. It received a public hearing Monday night.

That Bellingham policy and the others under consideration around the Northwest do not extend to banning cooking with natural gas or using gas fireplaces. On a practical level though, it's probably uneconomical to install new gas lines just for a smattering of stoves and fireplaces.

The movement to restrict or ban new natural gas hookups started in Berkeley, California, in 2019. Since then, around 50 more climate-conscious California cities and counties have passed laws or codes to require new buildings to be all-electric, according to a tally maintained by the Sierra Club.

On the other hand, over the last couple years, the legislatures of Arizona, Utah, Wyoming and at least ten other states have passed legislation to ban local cities and counties from restricting natural gas service. In other words, they wanted to ban the bans.

This past summer in Washington's state's second largest city, Spokane, home builders associations from the area financed a successful signature drive to qualify a related ballot measure. It would have asked voters to preemptively block the city from restricting natural gas hookups. The city council president said the council had no intention to take such a step, but nevertheless the proponents said they wanted to stop the spread of what they called "Seattle-style" bans on natural gas.

But in late summer, a county judge struck the measure, called the Spokane Cleaner Energy Protection Act, off the November ballot because she ruled it went beyond the bounds of what a local initiative can do.

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