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POLICY BRIEF

Washington's energy and environment

By Todd Myers,
Senior Vice President for Research

February 2025

Key Takeaways

1. Washington's CO2 emissions rose during Governor Inslee's tenure, even after COVID-related reductions.
2. Washington is far from meeting its legislative and executive targets for EV adoption, both in private and government fleets.
3. State data show little to no improvement in Chinook, coho, and steelhead populations over the past decade.
4. Adjusted for inflation, electricity costs rose 4%, while gasoline prices dropped 13% but remain high relative to national averages.
5. To meet its 2030 climate goals, Washington must reduce emissions at a rate three times higher than achieved during the COVID year.
6. Only about 13.7% of state-owned passenger vehicles are electric, far below the required 40% target for 2025.
7. The report highlights the failure of Washington's climate, energy, and wildlife policies, urging a shift toward practical solutions over symbolic efforts.

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Introduction

Governor Jay Inslee made fighting climate change his top issue, calling it "the number one priority for the United States of America" during his presidential campaign.[1] During his time as governor, however, Washington's CO2 emissions increased, even after COVID lockdowns dramatically reduced emissions in 2020.

Washington state also set goals for private sales of electric vehicles and purchases by state government. In both instances, Washington is far behind the goals set by the legislature and former governor.

Washington is also failing in its effort to increase salmon populations, another top state environmental priority. Poor salmon returns not only mean Chinook and other species continue to be endangered, but it also impacts tribes and anglers and is a contributing factor in the declining population of the Southern Resident Killer Whales, which are also a listed species.

Here is a look at the status of some key issues related to energy and the environment in Washington.

Failing to reduce CO2 emissions

The general fund operating budget subject to the outlook (NGF-O) increased from $33.6 billion in the 2013-15 biennium to $71.9 billion in the 2023-25 biennium – an increase of 51% after adjusting for inflation and population. For individuals, Washington's per capita tax burden is $6,670 – 14th highest in the nation.

There have been significant increases in particular areas of tax collection as well.

In the past decade, state elected leaders sharply increased property tax collections. According to the latest Tax Reference Manual the state property tax burden increased by 98% adjusted for inflation, increasing from $1.9 billion to $4.5 billion.

Over the past dozen years, elected officials in Washington state repeatedly called the state a "leader" in reducing CO2 emissions and addressing climate change. The data, however, tell a different story. Emissions consistently increased prior to COVID and rebounded quickly after 2020, above the targets set in state law.

1 Inslee: Running for president -- Climate is USA's 'No. 1 priority'

According to data from the Washington State Department of Ecology, Washington's CO2 emissions increased every year between 2012 and 2019. Statewide CO2 emissions increased from 91.8 million metric tons (MMT) in 2012 to 102.1 MMT in 2019, an increase of 11 percent prior to COVID.[2] In 2020, emissions fell to 88.3 and then rebounded to 96.1 in 2021. Between 2012 and 2021, Washington's CO2 emissions increased five percent at a time they were supposed to be falling.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does a separate count of CO2 emissions that is similar but does not include all emission sources used by Department of Ecology staff. Their data show Washington's CO2 emissions in 2022 were 10.7 percent higher than in 2012.[3]

Washington's per capita CO2 emissions declined slightly between 2012 and 2022, but the reduction was less than the national average and states like Florida and Massachusetts. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Washington's energy-related CO2 emissions (which does not include all emissions sources), fell from 9.8 metric tons (MT) per person in 2012 to 9.6 MT in 2022, a reduction of slightly more than 2 percent.[4] By way of comparison, U.S. per capita emissions fell by 11 percent, while emissions in Massachusetts fell by 9.5 percent and 11.5 percent in Florida.

Based on state data, between 2022 and 2030, Washington will have to reduce emissions by more than three times the emissions reduction during the COVID year of 2020 if it is to achieve the objectives outlined in state law.

Electricity costs increased slightly while gas prices declined adjusted for inflation

Thanks to abundant, low-cost hydropower, Washington state has some of the lowest electricity costs in the country with the 10th lowest average electricity costs in the nation in 2023 according to the U.S Energy Information Administration.[5] Prices increased from 6.94 cents per kilowatt hour (kWh) to 9.58 cents per kWh in 2023, an increase of 4 percent after inflation.

The average retail price of gasoline in Washington increased from $3.84 per gallon in 2012 to $4.45 in 2023, a decrease of about 13 percent adjusted for inflation.[6] Although Washington's inflation-adjusted prices have declined, the average price per gallon has increased significantly compared to the average national price. Between the end of 2012 and 2024, Washington's gasoline prices increased 21 percent more than the national average.[7]

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2 Washington State Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory: 1990–2019 and Washington State Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory: 1990-2018

3 https://cfpub.epa.gov/ghgdata/inventoryexplorer/#allsectors/allsectors/allgas/econsect/all

4 State Carbon Dioxide Emissions Data - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)

5 US Electricity Profile 2023 - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)

6 Washington Regular All Formulations Retail Gasoline Prices (Dollars per Gallon)

7 https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/gasdiesel/xls/pswrgvwall.xls

Gas prices are volatile, making linear comparisons more difficult and changes in price contingent on the starting year. For example, between 2019 and 2023, gas prices increased 20 percent after adjusting for inflation. This study is focused on the period between 2012 and 2024, so our estimate is based on that time period.

Recovery of Chinook populations is stalled

Contrary to the claim of an Inslee Administration spokesman that "salmon restoration" improved during the governor's time in office, state data show salmon populations have stagnated for the past twelve years.[8] According to the Puget Sound Partnership's Vital Signs report in 2023, "On average, spawner abundance across Puget Sound, has changed very little since the baseline period [of 1999] for three of the indicator species: Chinook, coho, and Puget Sound steelhead."[9]

Results between 2012 and 2022 reflect that trend. In 2012, the Governor's Salmon Recovery Office reported that "In most areas of the state, fish are increasing or staying the same while in a few areas, fish are slightly decreasing." By 2022 that assessment had grown worse, noting that "most of the species on the list are in crisis or not keeping pace with recovery goals."

Salmon returns in individual years are impacted by ocean conditions and population cycles, so straight line comparisons are not appropriate, but the long-term trends are clear and salmon populations have not meaningfully improved.

Washington is significantly behind its electric vehicle targets

After joining California's electric vehicle requirements, 35 percent of new vehicles sold in Washington state must be battery electric vehicles (BEV) or plug-in hybrid vehicles (PHEV) in 2026.[10] As of the end of 2024, Washington state is far from meeting that goal and would require EV sales to nearly double in two years. At the current rate of growth, only about 25 percent of new registered vehicles will meet the requirement in 2026, significantly below the 35 percent requirement.[11]

Through the end of 2024, about 22 percent of new vehicle registrations in Washington were either BEV or PHEV. This is a slight increase from 2023 when 20.5 percent of original registrations were for BEV or PHEV.

Washington state government is also certain to miss the EV purchase goal set by Governor Inslee in Executive Order 21-04.[12] The executive order requires

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8 Governor's spokesman insinuates state is succeeding at "salmon restoration." He's wrong. » Publications » Washington Policy Center

9 Vital Signs | Salmon

10 5811.SL.pdf

11 There is a slight difference between original registrations and new vehicle sales, which is what state law counts. The difference, however, is not significant and there is uncertainty about whether the state will count vehicles sold outside Washington but registered in the state.

12 21-04 - Zero Emission Vehicles.pdf

that "at least" 40 percent of passenger vehicles and light-duty trucks owned by state government be BEVs "by 2025," which the Department of Enterprise Services says means by the *end* of 2025. Unlike the California standards which require a percentage of new vehicles be BEVs, the governor's executive order requires 40 percent of the total stock of state-owned vehicles to meet the goal. Washington is far from that target.

At the beginning of 2025, about 22.5 percent of vehicles managed by the Department of Enterprise Services were BEVs. A spokesperson for DES says the agency also has an additional 554 BEVs on order. Assuming there are no gas-powered vehicles on order, this would bring the agency's percentage of BEVs to 35 percent of their total fleet. Only about one-third of state vehicles are managed by DES, however.

The Department of Enterprise Services does not have a full accounting of agency-owned vehicles, but they estimate that currently of the 3,373 passenger vehicles and light-duty trucks they manage, only 113 are BEVs, about 3.4 percent. Between DES and state agencies, about 13.7 percent of passenger vehicles owned or ordered by the state are BEVs. The state must triple that amount in one year to meet Governor Inslee's goal.

This analysis of where Washington is in meeting these targets is not an endorsement of the EV purchase goals, which were set arbitrarily. Indeed, failure to meet the required targets is an indication that they are needlessly difficult and expensive to achieve.

Conclusion

The data above clearly indicate Washington's climate policy, salmon policy and electric vehicle policies are failing. Data also suggest a closer examination of energy policy and state gas prices would be warranted, especially given the broad and bipartisan concern for affordability in an era of lingering inflation in Washington (and across the country).

The purpose of this 'report card' is not to pile on the mistakes of the past or single out those who made them, but rather to encourage learning from them. The first step toward solving a problem is acknowledging its existence, and there has been too much satisfaction taken in the attention given to these policies and not enough concern in their actual results.

Once we recognize these policies are a problem, we can focus on solutions so that Washington can improve its environment and be a true leader in areas like wildlife restoration and emissions reduction.

Washington Policy Center stands ready to help in that effort.

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About the Author

With more than two decades in environmental policy, **Todd Myers**'s experience includes work on a range of environmental issues, including climate policy, forest health, old-growth forests, and salmon recovery. A former member of the executive team at the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, he is a member of the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council.

He is the author of "Time to Think Small: How nimble environmental technologies can solve the planet's biggest problems," which outlines how small technologies are empowering people to protect threatened wildlife species, reduce CO2 emissions, and reduce ocean plastic. His previous book "Eco-Fads: How the Rise of Trendy Environmentalism Is Harming the Environment" documented how our environmental policies are driven by a desire to look good rather than to help the environment.

His writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, National Review, Seattle Times, and USA Today, and he has appeared on numerous news networks including CNBC, Fox News, the BBC, and CNN. He served as vice president of the Northwest Association of Biomedical Research and received their Distinguished Service Award in 2018 for his support of bioscience. He has also served as president of the Prescription Drug Assistance Foundation, a nonprofit providing medicines to low-income patients.

In 2021, Myers served as president of his local beekeeping club in his quest to build an army of stinging insects at his command. He has a bachelor's degree in politics from Whitman College and a master's degree in Russian/International Studies from the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He and his wife Maria live in the Cascade Mountains in Washington state with 200,000 honeybees, and he claims to make an amazing pasta carbonara and an incredible dirty vodka martini with blue-cheese-stuffed olives.