

## HB 2051, to ban all small gas-powered motors in Washington state

*Proposed bill would impose pain on consumers with no gain for the environment.*

By Todd Myers, Director, Center for the Environment

January 2024

### Key Findings

1. **House Bill 2051 would ban many small gas-powered motors in Washington state on the claim that this will reduce CO2 emissions.**
2. **Statewide CO2 emissions would not decline with the ban because the state already has a cap on CO2 emissions from gasoline which covers fuels for the engines covered by the ban.**
3. **The engines account for less than one percent of the state's CO2 emissions, and reductions from a ban on small gas motors would be offset by increases elsewhere.**
4. **Sponsors of the bill tacitly admit that switching to electric motors increases costs by offering tax breaks and subsidies for local governments.**
5. **Ultimately the ban would increase costs but would not yield a reduction in CO2 emissions.**

### Introduction

When Washington's cap on CO2 emissions took effect last year, Governor Inslee, legislators, and activists hailed it as a needed wide-ranging policy, claiming it would significantly reduce emissions from fuels that emit greenhouse gasses. Despite that claim, legislators and activists continue to add new regulations on top of the existing expensive program that purports to reduce emissions.

For example, House Bill 2051, a bill to ban small gas-powered engines in the state – such as leaf blowers, lawn mowers, and snow blowers – is being promoted as a bill that would supposedly help the state reduce carbon emissions.

This claim is not true. Like other similar regulations, the proposal would not reduce emissions. Banning small engines would simply

duplicate the existing strict rules covered by existing climate laws. The new proposal would only add expense to consumers without reducing any of the risks posed by climate change.

### Duplicating existing climate law

One the primary justifications for the bill is that it would help reduce state CO2 emissions.

Testifying in support of the legislation, Leah Missik of the advocacy group Climate Solutions said, "To meet our state's climate goals we have to address pollution from all sources, and off-road engines are often overlooked."<sup>1</sup> Pamela Clough of the group Environment Washington added that gas-powered leaf blowers and other small motors emit greenhouse gasses and banning them would help "ensure we don't miss another critical area where we can eliminate harmful greenhouse gas emissions."<sup>2</sup>

The claim that "off-road engines are often overlooked" is not true. These engines are covered under the state's existing CO2 cap, like every other engine – big and small.

Washington's law that taxes CO2 emissions, known as the Climate Commitment Act (CCA), puts a cap on fuels that emit greenhouse gasses. That means the state imposed a functional limit on the amount of gasoline that can be sold in Washington state. Even if everyone in the state purchased a gas-powered leaf blower or lawn mower, the amount of gasoline available to run that equipment will still decline annually, according to current law. At some point people with gas-powered lawn mowers simply wouldn't be able to buy fuel.

1 "House Environment & Energy Hearing," TVW, accessed January 2024 at <https://www.tvw.org/watch/?clientID=9375922947&eventID=2024011147&startStreamAt=2081&stopStreamAt=2142>

2 "House Environment & Energy Hearing," TVW, accessed January 2024 at <https://www.tvw.org/watch/?clientID=9375922947&eventID=2024011147&startStreamAt=2143&stopStreamAt=2208>

If small gas-powered motors were banned now, the fuel used by them would simply be replaced by increased use of gas in other motors. According to Environment Washington, gas-powered lawn and garden equipment emitted about 670,000 metric tons in 2020. I could not find their report explaining how they came up with that amount, but for discussion of HB 2051 let's assume it is accurate. The state's 2020 emissions data has not been released yet, but Washington's total CO2 emissions inventory in 2019 was about 102.1 million MT. Gas-powered lawn and garden equipment accounted for about two-thirds of one percent of total state emissions.

Reducing fuel use by a fraction of a percentage in one area would just shift that fuel elsewhere. High demand for fuel is driving the very high price for CO2 allowances sold by the state. Some, who are unwilling to pay the existing allowance prices, would purchase allowances at a slightly lower price, replacing the demand lost due to the slight reduction in demand from the ban on snow blowers and lawn mowers. The result would be no net reduction in fuel use.

Whether lawmakers pass this bill or not, Washington's CO2 emissions will be the same.

### **No environmental benefits, but increased costs**

Although this proposal would not reduce total CO2 emissions in Washington, it would add cost to consumers. The bill itself tacitly admits this is the case by providing tax breaks to switch to electric equipment and subsidizing the purchase of new equipment by local governments.

The purpose of a CO2 cap-and-trade system like Washington has, is to create a firm cap while providing flexibility on how to reduce emissions by selling allowances at a state auction. Rather than dictating how to reduce emissions, a cap-and-trade system encourages those covered by the law to find the least expensive way to comply.

Those who can cut emissions at a price lower than the auction price (through conservation, technology, or behavioral change) will do that instead of paying the tax. Others, who have few options, will end up paying the tax. The price that ultimately emerges from the auction of

allowances is the result of the interplay of these forces.<sup>3</sup>

Adding more regulation on top of the cap system, like the ban on small motors, would only increase the price consumers pay to meet the same level of CO2 emissions.

If switching to all-electric lawn mowers or snow blowers of similar quality would be less expensive than paying the tax on CO2, then the regulation isn't needed because price incentives would induce people to make the change anyway. If, however, switching is more expensive even with the increased fuel prices caused by the tax on CO2, then forcing the change increases costs. As noted above, the bill's sponsors tacitly admit this is the case by offering tax breaks and subsidies to help pay the additional costs of switching.

As a result, this bill would create the worst of both worlds – all cost and no benefit.

### **Conclusion**

This regulation is just one of several wasteful rules added on top of the state's CO2 cap that add cost to consumers without providing any climate benefit. Restrictions within the CCA, like limits on independent CO2-reduction projects, or separate laws like the low-carbon fuel standard, are not intended to help the planet, but to force a particular type of needlessly expensive CO2-reduction to achieve some other political goal.

House Bill 2051 fits in that category. Despite the claims that it would reduce CO2 emissions, the real value of the law is as a political signal by activist organizations and politicians that they care about climate change even though the bill would do nothing to reduce climate risk.

*Todd Myers is the Director of the Center for the Environment.*

*Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.*

*Published by  
Washington Policy Center  
© 2024*

*Visit [washingtonpolicy.org](http://washingtonpolicy.org)  
to learn more.*

---

<sup>3</sup> In Washington, this system has been distorted by the decision by staff at the Department of Ecology to put millions of additional CO2 allowances on the market at a fixed rate.