A few days ago, I wrote a post taking issue with the idea that AB 32’s emissions limit expires in 2020. Here’s a follow-up. Even with AB 32’s influence beyond 2020, California is right to want to do more. Through the leadership of Senators De Leon, Pavley, and others in the legislature, there’s a package of four bills on the table in Sacramento that will extend the state’s climate leadership by, among other things, enshrining the goal of reducing climate emissions to 80% below 1990 levels by 2050, and allowing ARB to set interim GHG targets for 2030 and 2040.

This is a critically important effort. We need more aggressive cuts in emissions to get us near the pathways that limit the worst impacts of climate change. Those impacts will hit home in California’s neighborhoods, affecting our already-stressed water supply, air quality, public health, coasts, fisheries, agricultural communities, power reliability, and many other issues. (The bi-partisan Little Hoover Commission summarized what’s at stake for California nicely in its report here.) AB 32’s goal of returning to 1990 emissions levels is a great start, but it doesn’t reflect where scientists know we must go in the mid- and longer term.

Doesn’t California already have a 2050 GHG reduction goal? Yes, it does, but a vulnerable one. In 2005, Governor Schwarzenegger signed an executive order setting the 80%-below-1990 emissions goal for mid-century. It was a huge and laudable step. Executive orders are, however, incapable of providing the regulatory certainty that investors and the business community need in order to make long-term climate goals attainable. Executive orders can be undone by the pen of any next Governor, at his or her whim. We need to send more durable signals to those who can innovate and invest and build our way to a low-carbon future.

Getting our policies right for the mid-term, meaning the time between now and 2030 or so, is especially important for starting to turn the ship. The scientists of Working Group 3 of the IPCC concluded that “[m]itigation scenarios in which policies stabilize atmospheric concentrations (without overshoot) in the range from 430 to 530 ppm CO_2 eq by 2100 lead to substantial shifts in annual investment flows during the period 2010–2029 compared to baseline scenarios.” In other words, we need to create the incentives for better investment now.

This is, plainly, one of the most important efforts in climate policy today: Can California transition from its strong and successful 2020 goals to robust mid- and longer-term objectives? AB 32 and other climate policies have created a lot of momentum in the right direction. The solar industry now provides many more jobs in the U.S. than does coal mining. Venture capital investment in green energy technology in California is robust and growing. When the federal Clean Power Plant rule is adopted, the market for California’s ideas and efficiency technologies will expand in other states. Now is not the time to lose steam (so to speak).

And on the question of whether California’s emissions policies matter in the end: They do. Several years ago, I was walking the halls of a U.N. climate conference in Durban, South Africa, and passed a group of delegates from a country whose language I didn’t even recognize (much less understand). I did, however, catch one phrase repeated several times in their conversation: “AB 32.” It’s not an exaggeration to say that the world is watching.