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As electric vehicles and their charging stations roll out quickly across the country, a Missouri University of Science and Technology professor is leading research about the fire risks they pose.

That's because they start with an uncontrolled chemical reaction inside the car battery that releases what Missouri S& T researcher Guang Xu calls simply "a huge amount of heat." The fires continue until the reaction has completed. Even extinguished lithium-ion batteries can be prone to reigniting.

Xu, a professor of mining and nuclear engineering, said that electric vehicles are generally safe, but that there needs to be more research on what might happen as they and their chargers become more common. On Thursday, the California Air Resources Board voted to ban sales of new gas cars after 2035. California's move should reshape the U.S. car market by quickening the transition to electric vehicles, the Associated Press reports.

In July 2020, an electric vehicle in a mine in Onaping, Ontario, caught fire underground. No one was hurt in that Canadian fire, though the miners, some with decades of experience, were unsure what to do.

"They knew what to do in case of a diesel fire, an oil fire, many different types of fire, but not an EV fire," Xu said. "We need to know the risks and how to mitigate them before an incident, and not wait for a tragedy."

There is a desire for this kind of information, according to the Fire Protection Research Foundation. "Members of the emergency response community have questions regarding personal protective equipment; firefighting suppression tactics; and the best practices for overhaul and post-fire clean-up," the organization wrote in a study looking to quantify best practices when combating an EV fire.

Xu and his colleagues held a workshop this spring at Missouri S& T to address EV fire risks. Attendees included vehicle manufacturers, industrial EV users, fire safety experts and university researchers.



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