

States, Cities Step Up Climate Change Responses

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By Neal Peirce

Before the fiscal crisis, there was the global climate crisis. After the fiscal crisis, we'll still have the global climate crisis — for the rest of our lives.

A nightmarish future awaits our children unless we can forge international accords, with teeth, to cut carbon emissions — the kind the Bush administration has scorned. But top-down won't do it all: Thousands of adaptive low-carbon strategies need to be fashioned from America's grassroots.

The severity of the threat is underscored by new reports indicating worldwide carbon emissions rose almost 3 percent last year alone. That growth trajectory, if continued, would lead to a highly alarming temperature rise of 11 degrees Fahrenheit by century's end. Among the likely consequences: large-scale melting of the Greenland ice sheet, the Himalayan-Tibetan glaciers and the Arctic's summer sea ice. Dangerous rise in the sea level would lead an ominous chain of reactions.

A recent surge in emissions from such rapidly industrializing countries as China, India and Brazil makes the challenge even tougher. Those nations aren't likely to consider significant cutbacks unless the nations with the biggest per capita carbon emission rates — especially the United States — undertake serious, sweeping efforts themselves.

Below the federal level, America has started significant efforts. Top items: on Sept. 25, six Northeastern states held the first “auction” of carbon permits, selling allowances to power plants in the nation’s first cap-and-trade system. And the Northeasterners (Maryland, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Vermont — with four more scheduled for a second auction in December) aren’t alone. The Western Climate Initiative (Arizona, California, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and Washington) will soon launch a cap-and-trade system that embraces manufacturing and vehicles as well as power plants.

While imperfect, such measures set the precedent for a meaningful nationwide carbon control system that the next president and Congress can advance nationwide.

California has been America’s champion among the states in setting major carbon reduction goals. Its latest breakthrough: a new law to cut emissions by rewarding cities and counties that fashion their development rules to limit carbon dioxide-spawning urban sprawl.

Delaware Treasurer Jack Markell, leading in his state’s governor race, is pushing a “climate prosperity strategy” that would make CO₂ reductions central to Delaware’s entire economic development efforts. Among his goals: creating a “green” supply chain for the state’s businesses, training a “green workforce” for massive energy-efficiency modernization of households and businesses, and promoting such industries as electric cars.

And there’s significant action at the city level — even beyond the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement to aim for Kyoto Protocol carbon reduction goals. Proposed by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, 884 mayors are now onboard.

Goals are one thing, comprehensive carbon-cutting programs another. On that score, New York (with Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s ambitious “PlanNYC”), Portland (Ore.), Seattle, Minneapolis, Boston and Denver are among those with the most ambitious agendas.

What's now dawning is a recognition that a central city is just one part of a metro area — that for climate steps to make a significant difference, the entire citistate, suburbs and satellite cities included, need to be part of the planning and action.

Recognizing that, King County, Wash., encompassing Seattle, Bellevue and other cities, took an early lead under County Executive Ron Sims. The Puget Sound Regional Council is on board, including an imaginative “Cascade Agenda” to protect 1.3 million acres of the region's farm and forest land from development.

Chicago will face the challenge next. Mayor Richard Daley and civic leaders recently unveiled a broad climate action plan, a roadmap of 29 actions to curb greenhouse emissions in areas from an updated energy building code to pushing public transit. The respected Center for Neighborhood Technology laid the groundwork, identifying specific emission sources and potential impacts.

But it took a local blogger, Kaid Benfield, to note how insufficient Chicago's effort may be if the suburbs and edge cities where the most people live — and where carbon emissions are the highest — aren't included.

There is hope: regional planners in recent years have laid out a “Chicagoland” vision that would help carbon cutbacks — guiding growth into city and town centers and along transit corridors, protecting open space and farmland, promoting walking and biking.

True regionalism is perking in Northern California, where three mayors — Chuck Reed of San Jose, Gavin Newsom of San Francisco, and Ron Dellums of Oakland — have just forged, with business and civic leaders, a Bay Area Climate Change Compact with goals ranging from 20,000 “green collar” jobs to big boosts for renewable energy.

“Rather than solely relying on city-by-city efforts, our compact will galvanize the horsepower of 100 cities, towns and counties across the Bay Area in a call for collective action,” said Carl Guardino, executive of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group.

Goals and true carbon savings aren't, however, synonymous. As Dellums trenchantly noted: "At the end of the day, we're at the margins of an enormous problem that dwarfs us all."

Neal Peirce's e-mail is npeirce@citistates.com.

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