Regional Responses to Global Climate Change

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Climate Change and Global Warming 101

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988 to provide a framework for scientists to study climate change. Through the IPCC, climate scientists from around the world have issued a series of reports, including three "Summary for Policymakers" reports issued this year.

The 2007 IPCC report evaluating climate change science states "most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely [90 to 99% certainty] due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations.[1]

Increasing average global temperatures will have a variety of potential impacts on climate. With regard to northwest agriculture, the 2007 IPCC report assessing impacts states: "warming in western mountains is projected to cause decreased snowpack, more winter flooding, and reduced summer flows, exacerbating competition for over-allocated water resources. …Moderate climate change in the early decades of the [21st] century is projected to increase yields of rain-fed agriculture by 5 – 20%, but with important variability among regions. Major challenges are projected for crops that are near the warm end of their suitable range or depend on highly utilized water resources.[2]

The IPCC reporting also shows the problems are urgent. Given the current level of greenhouse gas (GHG) equivalent in the atmosphere, there may already by a risk that average global temperatures will increase by more than 2ºC. Temperature increases above 2ºC are projected to be costly at best and potentially catastrophic at worst. Thus, many leaders have determined that the risks associated with greater increases in average global temperatures are unacceptable.[3]

Legislative Responses

States and local governments have adopted three new types of legislation responding to or driven by climate change.

Renewable Portfolio Standards (RPS) Legislation. Washington and Oregon are among many states that have adopted statutes requiring utilities to include renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and geothermal in power generation. Oregon's statue includes certain hydropower projects as qualifying resources and sets 25% of total retail electrical sales from qualifying sources by 2025 as a target. Increased power costs are a concern. However, Oregon's legislation includes mechanisms to protect consumers from cost increases. RPS legislation may ultimately reduce costs, especially if a federal RPS standard is adopted.[4]

GHG Reductions. On May 3, Governor Gregoire signed Senate Bill 6001, establishing GHG emissions reduction goals for Washington State as follows: reduce overall GHG emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, to 25% below 1990 levels by 2035, and to 50% below 1990 levels by 2050. The new law requires the governor to develop policy recommendations for the 2008 legislative session on how to achieve these goals. The recommendations must consider measures such as a load-based cap and trade system, carbon sequestration, and methods to use resources such as landfill gas and geothermal.

Oregon is considering legislation to reduce GHG emissions to 10% below 1990 levels by 2020 and 75% below 1990 levels by 2050. Legislative findings include statements that Oregon is vulnerable to global warming because of its dependence on snowpack for irrigation and that global warming will have detrimental effects on agriculture and wine making. The proposed legislation would create the Oregon Global Warming Commission to coordinate state and local efforts to reduce GHG emissions.

Pending bills in Congress suggest that a federal GHG reduction program will be mandatory and that it will rely on a cap and trade system. Although federal legislation appears unlikely during the current administration, there are two significant issues to track. First, will GHG emissions ultimately be regulated economy wide or by sector (e.g., power generation, transportation, industrial, commercial, residential, and agricultural activities) and how will compliance burdens be allocated? If a sector will be regulated, legislative or administrative participation becomes imperative because policy choices in allocating burdens will determine winners and losers.

Biofuels. Biofuels initiatives have already affected prices for corn and soybeans and influenced crop choices. The Chinese government has announced a moratorium on producing ethanol from corn and other food crops because of rising food prices. While not immune from criticism, biofuels initiatives are generally seen as providing both environmental and economic benefits.

Portland's biofuels ordinance is an interesting example of a local measure. Effective August 15, every service station offering diesel must also offer biodiesel blends; effective November 1, all gasoline must contain at least 10 percent ethanol. Portland is in the process of forming a partnership with eastern Oregon farmers to grow canola for biodiesel. The partnership is possible because the mandatory biodiesel requirement gives farmers a guaranteed market and a guaranteed price.[5]

Conclusion

State and local initiatives are currently ahead of federal initiatives, but a federal system of mandatory GHG controls will likely be in place by 2010. The impacts of federal and state climate change regulation are likely to be profound. Early identification of issues, including a legal analysis of climate regulation, is an important first step in developing a climate change strategy. Proactive businesses that take a long-term view will respond effectively as climate change legislation is adopted in coming years.

1. Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policymakers, page 8. For more about IPCC process, see http://www.ipcc.ch/about/about.htm.
2. Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Summary for Policymakers, page 10.
3. For an example of a business coalition advocating for immediate federal climate legislation to stabilize GHG concentrations, see the US Climate Action Partnership position paper at http://www.us-cap.org/ClimateReport.pdf.
4. See, UPI Energy Watch, "Analysis: Nation Ripe for a Federal RPS," http://www.upi.com/Energy/Analysis/2007/06/08/analysis_nation_ripe_for_a_federal_rps/4681/.
5. See, "Local engines go vegetarian," *Sustainable Life*, http://www.eastcountynews.com/sustainable/story.php?story_id=118097613720999900.