

Addressing Global Warming: A Way Forward By Michael Northrop

Recent U.S. government intransigence on global warming has been deeply unsettling to the conservation community. After more than a decade of determined and effective efforts to educate policymakers and encourage practical cost-effective actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, environmentalists have been dismayed to see the Bush Administration do an about-face from its somewhat encouraging campaign rhetoric and adopt a just-say-no approach when it comes to any federal role in mitigating global warming. Even given the events of September 11th and Washington's subsequent willingness to embrace at least the appearance of multilateralism, there is no evidence that the Administration seeks to reinvigorate policy action on global warming.

Despite the dismal record of the Bush Administration, there is reason for optimism. I would even argue against the grain of conventional wisdom that we have quietly turned a corner on this issue and that opportunities await support from the growing number of foundations that are now expressing an interest in global warming. I'd like to explain why I think we can be optimistic and what we can do to seize emerging opportunities.

The following observations are relevant:

First, all of the world's industrialized nations (except the U.S.) agreed in early November 2001 at Marrakech, Morocco, to adopt a final version of the Kyoto Protocol, which aims to reduce climate change-causing greenhouse gas emissions by 5 percent below 1990 levels. It appears likely that this agreement will be formally ratified in less than a year by enough governments to make the treaty international law. Forty industrialized countries--including Russia, Japan, Canada, and Australia as well as the countries of the European Union--have committed to formulate climate action plans to comply with the Kyoto accord. This in itself is a momentous development even if it hasn't received enough attention inside the U.S.

Second, despite the Bush Administration's unwillingness to address this issue, recent polling shows that most Americans view global warming as a serious problem that they would like to see addressed.

Third, Bush's rejection of Kyoto and the decision by the rest of the world to move forward without the U.S. has finally catalyzed Congress to act. For the first time since 1997, when 95 U.S. Senators voted in favor of the Byrd-Hagel resolution rejecting what would become the Kyoto Protocol, Congress seems poised to address global warming. Several bipartisan bills are under consideration or will soon be introduced, including major technology initiatives, a national carbon reporting system and a mandatory emissions "cap and trade" program. Senate leaders have pledged to advance a bill to regulate carbon from power plants early next year, and the war in Afghanistan has increased prospects for a serious debate on auto fuel efficiency standards. While actually enacting strong federal legislation in the short term will be difficult, 2002 offers real opportunities for building policymaker support, putting pressure on the Administration, and making climate change a visible issue in upcoming congressional elections.

Fourth, and perhaps most interesting of all, Americans are not waiting for their government to act; they are beginning to reduce greenhouse gas emissions themselves. All across the U.S., growing evidence suggests that a real movement has begun at the sub-federal level to lower greenhouse gas emissions, often at rates equal to or better than those proposed in the international accord:

- Six New England states (together with five eastern Canadian provinces) agreed this past spring to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 70-80 percent to stabilize the globe's climate system;
- New York State, which is not a part of that five state compact, is now in the process of formulating a climate action plan as well;
- The state of Massachusetts became the first state in the nation last year to mandate reductions in carbon emissions from power plants;
- California legislators recently proposed that state automobile efficiency rules be strengthened to meet the Kyoto reduction target;
- Fifteen states have developed clean energy funds with \$3.5 billion in expected assets to underwrite the development of clean energy generation in their states;

- Thirteen states have adopted policies that require some portion of the power generated to come from renewable sources;
- Nearly forty states have put in place net metering rules that allow utility customers to generate energy at home using solar arrays, wind power, and eventually fuel cells and to sell the excess energy back into the electric power grid (this reduces the cost for households wishing to install renewable energy systems by allowing them to pay down purchase costs more quickly);
- 109 municipalities across the country have developed plans for greenhouse gas reductions of 5-20 percent;
- Seattle's city council went so far as to formally pass a measure adopting the Kyoto Protocol;
- Chicago announced it would demand that 20 percent of all its energy come from renewable sources;
- San Francisco voters passed a referendum that will turn city rooftops into solar collectors to generate clean power;
- A growing number of corporations, including 3M, IBM, Nike, Johnson & Johnson, BP Amoco, and Royal Dutch Shell are actively reducing greenhouse emissions (Dupont, for example, has agreed to reduce its emissions by more than 65 percent);
- 600 hospitals recently announced they want to purchase renewable power;
- Faith communities are also getting involved, with scores of churches, mosques, and synagogues around the country promising to reduce their emissions and taking action;
- Several universities, including Tufts, have adopted the Kyoto Protocol and are analyzing their emissions footprints and adopting reductions strategies;
- Wesleyan University just announced it would seek to buy 10 percent of its power from renewable sources;
- At the same time, anecdotal evidence is emerging of increasing numbers of individual households adopting emissions reduction strategies.

If Alexis de Tocqueville, the eighteenth century political scientist and writer, who noted America's penchant for community organizing, were

traveling across the U.S. today, he would remind us that this surge of sub-federal activism is a prototypical American response. Many times in American history, individuals and communities have organized themselves to take action before the federal government does. Especially on an issue as complicated as global warming, it shouldn't be surprising that this kind of decentralized response is taking shape first.

A strong federal response is still required to achieve the really significant cuts scientists say we need to stabilize the earth's climate system. But, until we are able to demonstrate the public support necessary to overcome the opposition of fossil fuel and auto industries, serious federal policy action will be slowed.

Several conclusions emerge from this train of thought.

- First, there is a new movement afoot in our country to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; people from all walks of life care, want to do the right thing, and a growing number, both Democrats and Republicans, are taking action in all kinds of creative ways; the list of sub-federal initiatives provided above does not do justice to the surge of activity that is now emerging.
- Second, this emissions reduction movement is ill-formed, ill-defined, and not at all coordinated. One reason why it is easy to miss what is happening is that those taking action are often not directly associated with the beltway-based advocacy community that has done so much to put global warming on the political radar screen and which is arguing for federal policy action. Rather, the new reduction leaders are state legislators, city managers, corporate vice presidents, university professors, religious leaders, hospital administrators, and energy advocates at state-based organizations. Nor are these new leaders necessarily thinking in movement building terms about organizing themselves or about building political strength. The disconnect between the politically activist, beltway-based conservation community and the practical, nuts and bolts-oriented reductions movement poses a challenge and must somehow be bridged if we're to build a powerful movement that can encourage more such action and support federal policy change.

- Third, emissions reduction initiatives at the sub-federal level provide important funding opportunities. To expand the movement, there is a need to get more of these initiatives up and running. Most of the organizations that undertake sub-federal initiatives are severely underfunded. Foundations that can work at the state, city, community, business, faith-based and other sub-federal levels can make a real difference by providing critically needed support. As the scores of sub-federal initiatives multiply and expand, they can help model potential strategies for national scale greenhouse gas emission reductions, while also making a contribution to reducing U.S. emissions.
- Fourth, this new “movement” needs organizational support. Foundations that can operate regionally and nationally could help support the creation of mechanisms to stitch sub-federal efforts closer together, amplify their successes through media and communications, and thereby encourage others at the sub-federal level to develop their own reduction efforts as well. A growing, better-defined, more politically able movement can also train its sights on the federal government to urge it to take action. As the portfolio of actions at the sub-federal level grows, as more is learned about which actions are most effective, and as the benefits and practicality of such actions become apparent, the federal government will be more likely to take action. And as sub-federal actions proceed in a cost effective manner and with many co-benefits like cleaner healthier air, it will become less possible to hide behind claims that more fossil fuel power plants are necessary and that federal action to reduce emissions will ruin the American economy. In summary, a well-organized sub-federal reductions movement could have an important impact on provoking federal action. Even this Administration will be susceptible to such pressure if the growing sub-federal movement strengthens and becomes better organized.
- Fifth, while foundations should be encouraged to support sub-federal initiatives and movement building, those that operate at the national level also need to continue to support related federal policy action on such things as power plant reform and automobile efficiency. These efforts are critical since they represent the largest greenhouse reductions opportunities available in the U.S.

The voices of state and local policymakers, business leaders, the faith community and others who are successfully taking action to combat global warming could aid these federal policymaking efforts significantly. Until now there has been almost no contact between the federal and sub-federal levels. These connections could help a great deal and foundations can assist here as well by deliberately seeking out such opportunities.

Getting the U.S. to take real action is critically important. While the willingness of the rest of the world community to take action without the U.S. is an extremely welcome development, the U.S., which represents 4 percent of the world's current population and 25 percent of the globe's greenhouse gas emissions has a responsibility to act. A strengthened sub-federal reductions movement connected to federal policymaking could help this happen faster. With the creation of a new funders working group on global warming based at the Consultative Group on Biological Diversity (cgbc@cgb.org), and with a growing number of foundations expressing interest in the topic, there appears to be an opportunity to make important progress over the next several years. Certainly, few other issues confronting our planet deserve our attention as much as global warming.