

Climate advocates allow lofty goals to get watered down

By Bob Doppelt

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At a time when rapid cuts are needed in climate-damaging carbon dioxide emissions, the recent Oregon legislative session produced only modest results.

Numerous factors — some outside of the control of global warming advocates — combined to douse their ambitions.

Going into the session, groups promoting climate policies had high hopes that the Legislature would adopt far-reaching protections. After all, this would be Gov. Ted Kulongoski's last major legislative session, climate protection was one of his priorities, and he wanted to leave a legacy.

In addition, the Democrats controlled both the House and Senate.

But it was not to be.

By the time the session convened, unemployment in Oregon was in excess of 10 percent and rising. State revenue projections were bad and getting worse. Not only were officials preoccupied with plugging gaping holes in the state budget, no one wanted to do anything that could potentially cost more jobs.

These issues were beyond the control of climate advocates. But the governor and groups advocating for climate protection could have foreseen other factors that worked against climate bills.

One issue was the reaction of groups that believed they had something to lose from global warming policies. Feeling stung by the passage of a bundle of such policies in the 2007 legislative session, a coalition of businesses and utilities that oppose climate protection, led by Salem lobbyist Mark Nelson, organized almost a year before the session started.

In contrast, climate advocates didn't get organized until the fall, just months before the gavel dropped to open the session.

Nelson's group and other opponents accurately sensed that many legislators were concerned about the economic effects of climate protection in general, and the Western Climate Initiative in particular. A lobbying campaign was developed that claimed huge job losses would result.

Opponents also urged legislators to wait and see if Congress would establish a cap-and-trade program before joining a regional program.

Even though an opposition campaign should have been expected, climate advocates seemed ill prepared to counter these claims. Adding to this problem was a critical misjudgment by groups promoting global warming policies.

Many of the new legislators that put the Democrats in control were elected in traditionally Republican districts. They knew their support of progressive legislation could be used against them in the future.

Climate advocates failed to grasp the lack of unanimous Democratic support until it was too late to address those fears.

These and other factors conspired to quickly squash Senate Bill 80. The centerpiece of the governor's climate package and would have authorized the state of Oregon's participation in the Western Climate Initiative.

Bills that climate advocates opposed also became law. For instance, state tax incentives for wind farms were cut from \$10 million to \$3.5 million. Wind proponents say the reduction will eliminate Oregon's competitive advantage in enticing wind companies to locate in Oregon.

Not so, said Rep. Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene, who supported the change. He wrote on the Blue Oregon blog that the bill would simply "stop subsidizing big wind projects that produce few jobs after construction and send most of their power to California to meet the California Renewable Portfolio Standard."

Also disappointing to advocates was a bill that allowed energy generated from existing biomass and municipal waste facilities to be included in the state's Renewable Portfolio Standard.

Climate proponents say this bill will undermine efforts to develop new forms of renewable energy. But Rep. Chris Edwards, D-Eugene, who pushed the bill, said excluding older biomass generating facilities from the RPS puts them at an economic disadvantage.

Even so, the session was not a total bust.

Reductions in carbon emissions from transportation fuels sold in Oregon became law, as did a ban on the ability of Oregon utilities to provide power to the state by building new coal plants.

And the transportation bill could be a sleeper. Although it mostly promotes sprawl that will increase vehicle emissions, it also, for the first time, includes least-cost planning transportation requirements. More energy efficient forms of transportation could result.

So, give the legislature a grade of C on climate protection this session. It could become a C-plus if, as advocates hope, the governor vetoes the cuts in wind incentives and changes to the Renewable Portfolio Standard.

And the grade could rise even higher down the road if the transportation bill's least-cost planning requirement makes a big dent on vehicle emissions. But with climate scientists saying that carbon emissions must be rapidly slashed to avoid runaway climate change, for now it seems that a major opportunity was lost.

Better reading of the political tea leaves and significant work to refute the economic arguments will be needed to produce the far-reaching climate policies that are urgently needed.