

Climate change: Where legislators stand

By Bob Doppelt

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The next Congress seems intent on enacting climate legislation. Previous attempts failed, so trying is not the same as doing. Even if Congress succeeds, federal legislation may do more harm than good. The cap-and-trade bill announced in October by Reps. John Dingell, D-Mich., and Rick Boucher, D-W.Va., for instance, seems more intent on protecting the coal and auto industries than on cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

The uncertainty of federal legislation makes state action all the more important. For that reason the public should know where their state lawmakers stand on the issue.

I e-mailed a questionnaire to eight local legislators seeking their views on key questions: Do they believe the Earth is warming beyond natural levels? If yes, do humans play a role? Should state government play a role in reducing emissions statewide, and if so what type of role? And, should state government prepare for the consequences of climate change?

Seven of the officials responded. Their views were remarkably similar. They all believe the Earth is warming beyond natural levels and that humans were the dominant cause. State Sen. Bill Morrisette, D-Springfield, for instance, said, "I believe weather extremes are a result of man-assisted global warming and things are only going to get worse." Everyone agreed that the state should prepare its infrastructure and buildings for climate change.

Each legislator said state government should "walk the talk" by reducing its own emissions. Most lauded actions taken so far. For example, "State employees in the Salem area are given bus passes funded by revenue from parking spaces," according to state Rep. Nancy Nathanson, D-Eugene. Hybrids and biodiesel vehicles dominate the state vehicle fleet.

Despite these steps, officials said more action is needed. For instance, state Rep. Chris Edwards, D-Eugene, said the quantity of paper used by the Legislature itself is enormous. He intends to introduce a bill to require the Legislature to quantify its emissions and become “carbon neutral.”

All of the officials said the state should adopt policies to foster emissions reductions by businesses and homeowners. Although the Legislature recently enacted new energy conservation and efficiency policies, most thought more is needed. Expanded passenger and freight rail use, stronger building codes and tougher appliance standards were some of the options mentioned. Even these ideas don't tap the huge potential in this arena.

The officials will also consider the cap-and-trade proposal developed by the Western Climate Initiative, a joint effort by Western states and Canadian provinces. It would begin in 2012 with a mandatory cap on energy producers, landfills, wastewater facilities and manufacturing plants that emit more than 25,000 tons of carbon dioxide. The cap would gradually be lowered and broadened to include other sectors.

But the legislators seem uncertain about the WCI. One concern is the complexity of the program that proposes to regulate hundreds of emitters in several states and two nations. “The details are the key,” said state Rep. Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene.

Another worry is that if Oregon acts alone to ratchet down emissions more than other states, businesses will move elsewhere. This concern led a number of the officials to say that ideally the federal government should take the lead.

Opposition from legislators who don't believe in global warming or are not swayed by the WCI also makes new legislation uncertain. One official, for example, said that about a third to half of the Democrats are either global warming deniers, are not convinced that cap-and-trade is the best solution, or want to see the federal government act first.

In addition, money is likely to be a stumbling block. The state has a projected \$530 million state budget shortfall. It also needs to fund

emission reductions. Business and residential energy tax credits have traditionally been used but “overall the use of tax credit and subsidy programs put a significant strain on the state budget,” said state Sen. Vicki Walker, D–Eugene. Finding ways to attract capital from state and national sources to finance energy efficiency and renewables will be a top legislative priority.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski has made climate and energy legislation top priorities, and officials said these issues would be a primary focus of the 2009 legislative session. Based on what I heard, success will hinge on the level of confidence legislators gain in the effectiveness of cap–and–trade, the availability of innovative financing mechanisms and the degree to which Kulongoski puts his political muscle behind the WCI.

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Bob Doppelt (bob–cwch@att.net) is director of resource innovations at the University of Oregon; he also directs the UO’s Climate Leadership initiative. He is writing a series of columns on climate change for The Register–Guard.