

State climate change group has big job

By Bob Doppelt

For The Register-Guard

Published: March 24, 2008 12:00AM

Although few people seem to know it, Oregon has legislatively mandated greenhouse gas reduction targets. A new state Global Warming Commission is responsible for overseeing attainment of the new goals. The commission met for the first time on March 17. It has a big job ahead.

Both the targets and the commission were established by the 2006 Legislature in House Bill 3543, the Climate Change Integration Act. Gov. Ted Kulongoski's second global warming advisory committee, the Climate Change Integration Group, played a key role in developing HB 3543. Full disclosure: I was a member of the group.

HB 3543 turned greenhouse gas reduction targets that initially were established by executive order into law: By 2010, emissions in Oregon are to be stabilized; by 2020, the state is to reduce emissions 10 percent over 1990 emission levels; and, by 2050, the state now has a goal of achieving at least a 75 percent reduction in emissions compared with 1990 levels.

Energy producers and users of all types — including utilities, private companies, households and government will, in principle — need to comply with these reduction goals.

The “in principle” part is one reason the new commission has such a big job ahead. HB 3543 gave the commission major responsibilities but no formal authority. No penalties exist for missing the targets. The commission must use persuasion and other tools to accomplish its work.

I asked Angus Duncan, chairman of the new commission, how he thought the group would accomplish its goals without any real authority. Turns out he has been down this road before as a former Oregon member of the Pacific Northwest Electric Power and Conservation Planning Council.

The Power Council, he told me, “had no real authority. The impact the council has had over the years stems from doing credible analysis and trying to develop road maps for good energy and conservation planning that others could follow.

“That’s a pretty useful template for the global warming commission.”

In addition to Duncan, the commission has 11 voting members ranging from Bishop David Brauer-Riekie from the Oregon Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to as Gregg Kantor, president and chief operating officer of Northwest Natural.

Environmental, forestry and other constituencies also are represented.

In addition, 14 nonvoting members, including state agency heads and members of the Legislature, are represented on the commission. The latter group is especially important to Duncan.

“Most of the state agency heads are ex-officio members of the commission. So, we can examine state transportation and forestry plans, for example, and say how they may or may not help achieve the state’s mandated emission reduction targets. In this way I think the commission can achieve its goals within its existing authorities.”

The other reason the commission has such a big task ahead is that meeting the state emission targets will require some fancy footwork.

According to the report the Climate Change Integration Group issued to the new commission, statewide emissions have grown by 22 percent from 1990 levels. Under a business-as-usual scenario, emissions are expected to grow by another 27 percent by 2020. At least 70 percent of the growth is expected to come from transportation and electricity use in buildings.

Comparing the mandated reduction goals against the business-as-usual scenario means that by 2020, the state would need to achieve a 42 percent reduction against forecasts. For 2050, it would represent a 90 percent reduction from forecasted levels.

Said differently, over the next 42 years Oregon must reduce carbon emissions by 90 percent compared with today’s economy. It essentially would need to become carbon free.

Achieving the emission goals will be vitally important to this and future generations of Oregonians. In their final synthesis report issued last November, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said the rate of global warming between now and 2030 is likely to be twice that of the previous century.

The panel predicts the frequency of deadly storms will increase. Sea levels will rise by one to two feet, threatening to flood coastal cities and estuaries. Glaciers, snow and ice will disappear from many mountains, leading to water shortages.

Heat waves will become more frequent, affecting agricultural production and public health, especially in hot areas. Oceans will become acidic, leading to fisheries loss.

So it appears the new commission has been given what could well turn out to be one of the most important tasks any governmental body has tackled: steering state efforts to resolve and prepare for global warming.

Duncan is confident the commission can succeed. “I’m optimistic that we can meet our 2020 targets and provide the next generation with a solid basis for achieving the 2050 goal.”

Let’s hope he’s right.

HHHH

Bob Doppelt (bob-cwch@att.net), director of resource innovations and the Climate Leadership Initiative at the University of Oregon, is writing a series of columns on climate change for The Register-Guard.

Copyright © 2008 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA
(<http://regweb.registerguard.com/rga/index.php/info/copyright>)
