

3 states, province sign West Coast climate pact

3 states, province to coordinate greenhouse gas reduction goals

By David R. Baker, staff writer

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With climate-change legislation stymied at the federal level, a coalition of West Coast states and one Canadian province on Monday signed a regional pact to rein in greenhouse gas emissions and fight global warming.

The governors of California, Oregon and Washington, along with the premier of British Columbia, agreed to put a price on carbon dioxide emissions across an area that includes 53 million people.

Under the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy, the four West Coast governments will also use similar rules to encourage the use of alternative fuels and the adoption of electric cars. And they will hunt for ways to deal with ocean acidification, a side effect of rising carbon dioxide levels and a deadly threat to shellfish.

"It is time, clearly, because we are the first generation to feel the sting of climate change, and we are the last generation that can do something about it," said Washington Gov. [Jay Inslee](#) in San Francisco, where he joined California Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) and Oregon Gov. [John Kitzhaber](#) to sign the pact. British Columbia Premier [Christy Clark](#) met with the three earlier in the day via teleconference.

The pact will shape climate-change policies in a region that ranks as the world's fifth-largest economy, with an annual gross domestic product of \$2.8 trillion.

Pact needs others

But Brown and his counterparts acknowledged Monday that the agreement won't have much effect if they can't entice other states, provinces and possibly whole countries to join. National climate-change legislation in the United States has been blocked in Congress, where some lawmakers from both parties fear potential economic costs - while others deny that man-made global warming exists. Brown and his fellow Democratic governors expressed frustration at the lack of federal progress.

"This is the initiation of a very important agreement on the West Coast, but it's got to spread east, and it's got to spread west," Brown said. "To actually utter the words 'global warming' is deviant and radical in 2013. But here we are, and we're doing it."

The three states and one province won't necessarily use the same approach to putting a price on carbon. There are several options. California last year launched a cap-and-trade system, in which the state sets a declining annual limit on greenhouse gas emissions. Companies buy and sell permits to emit those gases, with the number of permits shrinking slowly over time. British Columbia, in contrast, uses a simple "carbon tax" of \$30 Canadian (\$28.73 U.S.) per ton of greenhouse gas emissions. The tax is included in fuel prices and is used to offset other provincial taxes. Washington and Oregon have yet to choose either system. The legislatures of both states considered cap-and-trade bills in 2009 but didn't adopt them because of concerns about the potential economic impact.

The new pact commits Inslee and Kitzhaber to giving carbon pricing another try. Oregon, it says, will "build on existing programs to set a price on carbon emissions." Washington "will set binding limits on carbon emissions and deploy market mechanisms to meet those limits."

'Failure is not an option'

"The people of Washington clearly want a limit, a cap on carbon pollution, and a price," Inslee said. "The mechanism is something we're going to work on. The one thing is, failure is not an option."

The [House of Representatives](#) passed a global warming bill in 2009 that would have created a national cap-and-trade system. But President Obama didn't make it a priority, throwing his effort into health care reform instead, and the bill died in the Senate. Many congressional Republicans now publicly doubt the existence of man-made climate change, making any new federal global warming law unlikely.

There's no guarantee Monday's regional agreement will fare any better. In 2008, the same participants announced a global-warming pact that also included Arizona, Montana, Manitoba, New Mexico, Ontario, Quebec and Utah. The four provinces and seven states, working together as the Western Climate Initiative, planned to build a cap-and-trade system spanning 20 percent of the U.S. economy and 70 percent of Canada's.

Only California and Quebec persevered. Quebec is expected to join California's cap-and-trade system next year.

The new pact grew out of a 5-year-old regional initiative called the [Pacific Coast Collaborative](#), which also includes Alaska. But Alaska, heavily dependent on the oil industry, did not join the new agreement.

Protest against fracking

The politics of oil intruded on Monday's signing ceremony as well. Demonstrators opposed to hydraulic fracturing gathered outside, chanting "Jerry Brown, don't let us down! Ban fracking now!"

Inside, Brown urged critics to wait for the results of a state-commissioned study of fracking's potential dangers to air quality, water supplies and climate change.

"I think we ought to give science a chance," Brown said. "Everybody ought to be excited, critics and supporters alike, because California will provide the information to take this debate to the next level."

[Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2013:](#)

Our fatalistic acceptance of horrible air

By Robert Price

I went to a concert at the Fox Theater a couple of weeks ago. The performer, who lives in Los Angeles, paused at one point in the show to describe his descent from the Tejon Pass into the San Joaquin Valley. "You have this amazing view as you come down the mountain," he said, "and then you see this ..."

If he finished his sentence I didn't hear it because half the crowd turned to a row-mate and, with a mix of laughter and resignation, finished it for him: "blanket of smog." Or words to that effect.

A psychologist might characterize our collective mindset on this subject as fatalistic acceptance. It's here, we don't like it, but what are we going to do? And so we don't.

Bakersfield's smog is someone else's fault, we say. And there's enough truth in that statement for us to feel put-upon and exonerated. Dirty air wends its way down from the Bay Area, runs into the horseshoe-shaped trap of our three conjoined mountain ranges and just hovers. Long-haul truckers and other non-local travelers race down Interstate 5, on the valley's west side, spewing soot and carbon emissions as they go. And lately we hear that some sort of weird jet-stream vortex is injecting ozone from China into our skies. What next, fumes rising from the bowels of hell?

The truth is, though, we've enjoyed playing the victim for so long, we can't seem to summon the collective will to actually do anything about it. Several noteworthy efforts aside, it seems we haven't even tried. Everyone acknowledges that cars idling at fast-food drive-thrus pollute the air, but no public official I'm aware of has ever suggested a ban or moratorium on their proliferation. Everyone acknowledges that leaf blowers are, at best, huge nuisances and, at worst, contributors to our omnipresent cloud of particulate matter, but, you know, we don't want grass clippings on our sidewalk.

Addressing those issues would be relatively small steps. On a broader scale, our county supervisors might want to start weighing the worthiness of proposed new projects based on their air (and water)

quality impacts first and tax-base potential second, not the other way around. But the biggest, most challenging, most controversial change we should collectively consider involves what is, for many of us, our most prized possession: our vehicles.

The evidence is in, and the consensus is that electric cars are net-benefit components when it comes to air quality. They've made only a small dent in the local new-car market, but their day is coming, make no mistake. The federal government and the governments of several states are building increasingly robust charging infrastructures. Electric cars, or EVs, can run for 100 miles on a single charge, making them perfectly suited for running around town and medium-range commuting. Their range limitations worry people, but, soon enough, as charging stations continue to multiply across the state and battery technology improves, that will be a non-factor.

Detractors claim that EVs are no cleaner than fossil-fuel powered cars because, instead of coming out of millions of tailpipes, the emissions simply belch out of the power plants that deliver electricity to all of those charging stations. Not true. Even in cities where coal is the primary fuel for electricity generation, EVs are cleaner than the typical, new gasoline-powered compact car. In the areas of the country where natural gas drives power generation, as in the West, the difference is even more pronounced.

Bottom line is, this transportation transition isn't going away.

The city with the worst air in the U.S. ought to be looking at every possible solution, no matter who's pushing it. Lungs know no party affiliation. Our city council, county supervisors, and state and federal representatives need to step up. Might the valley be worthy of emergency federal incentives? Should this entire region be declared an air-quality enterprise zone? Those are unprecedented (and admittedly ill-defined) answers, but intractable problems call for creative solutions.

One thing that I know won't help: We can't just shrug and continue to play victims of circumstance.

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