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Cap-and-trade must do more to combat climate change in the Valley

By Adam Gray

California's landmark climate change policy, cap-and-trade, needs legislative approval to continue beyond 2020. What's more, in order to avoid being overturned in the courts, it needs approval from two thirds of the legislature.

I have taken a critical view of similar climate change policies in the past. Not because I object to their stated goals, but because they have a habit of saddling the Valley with all of the burden while rich coastal communities reap all the rewards.

So before the environmental lobby starts throwing mud at anyone who doesn't view the world through their particular rose-colored glasses, let me set the record straight on my feelings about climate change and cap-and-trade.

Climate change is real and human activities greatly contribute to it. Our society and our economy must recognize and adapt to the impact climate change is having on the world in which we live. Change is hard, but hiding our heads in the sand and pretending climate change is a myth is a recipe for disaster. California has always been a leader, and we should stay at the forefront of this issue.

But part of being a trailblazer is taking the risk of making a wrong turn. We must be able to admit fault and correct course. If we are so arrogant that we cannot bring ourselves to admit we have made a mistake, then we have failed to live up to the responsibilities of leadership.

And fail we have.

While the investment of billions of cap-and-trade dollars has clearly given rise to new economic opportunities in some parts of the state, other areas have yet to share in this prosperity. Residents of the Valley are well versed in the costs and sacrifices of combating climate change, but there are few new businesses, industries, or good-paying jobs being created here to show for it.

Why?

With billions of dollars available to invest in our communities, why has the "green economy" taken off for some Californians but not for us?

Unsurprisingly, the areas of California which have experienced the largest growth in green jobs and businesses are those which have received the lion's share of state cap-and-trade funding. What is surprising is that there appears to be no correlation between a region's success in reducing emissions and the amount of funding that region receives.

For example, the San Joaquin Valley was able to achieve more than double the emissions reductions as those achieved by the Bay Area, and the Valley did this with just a third of the funding. In other words, the Bay Area managed to secure triple the investment while providing half the return.

Cap-and-trade is redistributing wealth from the poorest areas of the state, the San Joaquin Valley and the Inland Empire, to the wealthiest areas along the coast.

So I understand why my colleagues from those regions simply want to continue business as usual. It's a good business for them.

But here is the thing – climate change hits very close to home for the Valley. California is warming and becoming even dryer. The result is a smaller Sierra snowpack which melts at an accelerated rate, creating flood risks early in the season and leaving no water in reserve when we need it. In the past, the snowpack has acted as California's largest natural reservoir, but, if this pattern of early melt continues, we will effectively lose one third of our state's water storage and devastate the agricultural economy of the Valley in the process.

For us, climate change is not just a political movement – it's a clear and present threat to our livelihoods.

The Valley has more to gain or lose in the fight against climate change than perhaps any other region of California.

Some projects have the potential to work for the Valley. High-speed rail could be an example of striking the right balance. It will create jobs and infrastructure improvements while also taking cars off the road and improving the Valley's air quality. The project directly invests where the needs are greatest while simultaneously providing benefits statewide, assuming it, in fact, connects the Valley to the rest of California. Gov. Jerry Brown got this one right, and we need to do more of this.

We desperately need solutions not just to minimize the damage already done, but also to implement strategies allowing us to adapt to this new normal. If that solution is cap-and-trade, so be it. But simply ratcheting up burdens on the Valley while failing to recognize that this is where investment is most needed – and most effective – is not good government.

I stand ready to fight climate change, but I will not support projects where the poorest Californians bear the burden while the wealthiest “go green.”

Adam Gray represents California's 21st Assembly District, which includes all of Merced and part of Stanislaus counties. He wrote this for The Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star.