

Sonoma County remains far from greenhouse gases goal

Guy Kovner, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 5-14-10

Greenhouse gas emissions dropped slightly in Sonoma County last year, but it was scant evidence of progress in the campaign against climate change, environmentalists said Thursday.

The 3 percent drop, representing about 147,000 fewer tons of greenhouse gases, was a “positive sign,” said Ann Hancock, Climate Protection Campaign executive director.

But Hancock attributed the shift to the economic slump, rather than conservation, and said there is “much angst” over the substantial gap between current emissions and the county's target — a 25 percent reduction from 1990 emissions levels by 2015.

“This is a wake-up call about where we are,” Hancock told a crowd of about 150 people at the sixth annual Climate Protection: Everybody Profits conference at the Sebastopol Veterans Building.

The Climate Protection Campaign is a countywide coalition founded in 2001 by Ann Hancock, who also began Sustainable Sonoma County. Since its founding the group has gained a commitment from Sonoma County and its 11 cities to cut greenhouse gas emissions and each year invites leaders from the community to hear and report on progress toward that goal.

Dave Erickson, technical consultant to Hancock's nonprofit organization, was even more blunt. “Nothing we've done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions has really had any effect,” he said in an interview.

The county generated about 4.3 million tons of greenhouse gases last year, measured in carbon dioxide equivalents. The 2015 goal, adopted five years ago by all nine cities and the county, is about 2.8 million tons.

“We have always known that the goal was ambitious,” said Valerie Brown, Board of Supervisors chairwoman, who spoke at the conference. “I still think we are committed.”

Carbon dioxide equivalents include three greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, all with global warming potential.

Transportation accounts for 62 percent of the county's emissions, and that segment increased less than 1 percent last year.

Most of the decline was due to a 17 percent drop in emissions from the generation of electricity consumed in the county, a segment responsible for 19 percent of all emissions.

Power-related emissions would have dropped more, Erickson said, but last year's drought forced the county to use more “dirty” power — generated by fossil fuel combustion — instead of carbon-clean hydroelectric power.

Sonoma County's reduction in emissions was due to economic conditions, population change and weather, Erickson said.

In addition to transportation and electricity, the statistics include emissions from natural gas combustion (17 percent of the total) and methane from decomposing solid waste (2 percent).

But Hancock urged the conference crowd, including city and county officials, to pursue local climate protection goals and to lobby for changes at the state and federal level.

Climate change, she said, is a “slow-onset catastrophe” easily overlooked as people cope with threats to their jobs, homes and businesses.

Brown noted successes like the Sonoma County Energy Independence Program, which granted \$24 million in loans for residential and commercial energy efficiency projects in its first year.

That investment in cleaner air, she said, “is not going to be returned for some time.”