

Governor: Backup plan on global warming needed

Wyatt Buchanan, San Francisco Chronicle, 12-3-09

SACRAMENTO -- California has set an ambitious agenda to combat climate change, but on Wednesday Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the state needs to prepare for the worst if human action cannot stop global warming and the rise of sea levels.

In an announcement on San Francisco's Treasure Island, Schwarzenegger said he is creating a panel of 23 California leaders to recommend specific actions to prevent the destruction of infrastructure and deal with a depleted snowpack, the spread of disease, intense wildfires and other calamities that would result within the century from climate change.

"I normally never make a Plan B because then you start concentrating on that and not really on Plan A," Schwarzenegger said. "But ... I think we have a responsibility to have a Plan B in case we can't stop the global warming."

Treasure Island, where three years ago the governor signed the state's aggressive greenhouse gas reduction law, is among many locations in the state projected to be underwater from the sea level rising within a century.

Adaptation strategy

The creation of the panel is a top recommendation of the so-called California Climate Adaptation Strategy report released Wednesday. The report anticipates that average temperatures will rise by as much as 5 degrees Fahrenheit by 2050 and 9 degrees by 2100. Also, sea level is anticipated to rise by as much as 18 inches by 2050 and more than 4 1/2 feet by 2100.

In addition, the report finds that the state also should anticipate a greater number of "extreme events," such as heat waves, wildfires, droughts and floods.

To deal with that, the report recommends that hazards from climate change be included in environmental reviews for new development and state emergency planning. It also suggests the state should create a more systematic approach to decide how to pay for prevention efforts and to decide what parts of the state are most at risk.

Recommendations

In all, the 200-page report has far-reaching recommendations for dealing with climate change in a collaborative way by looking at impacts on public health, biodiversity and habitat, ocean and coastal resources, water management, agriculture, forestry, transportation and infrastructure.

Included in those areas are broad recommendations to:

- Strengthen threatened communities so they will be less vulnerable to climate change.
- Improve development planning and ensure food is grown closer to populations that consume it.
- Restrict development in areas vulnerable to climate change impacts.

- Aggressively push water conservation.
- Enhance the state's response to invasive species that target agriculture.
- Improve forest management.
- Consider higher water levels in transportation planning (San Francisco International Airport is a location expected to be underwater as sea level rises).

The 23-person panel will make specific recommendations by next July. It is a diverse and bipartisan group of state leaders including former Gov. Pete Wilson, a Republican, and former Assembly Speaker Robert Hertzberg, a Democrat. William K. Reilly, the former administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, also was named to the panel.

Sunne Wright McPeak, who led the task force that developed the strategy report, called it a "watershed announcement" and said it was a call to action for average Californians to become involved with reducing the impacts of global warming in the state.

Toward that goal, state officials were joined by Google CEO Eric Schmidt, who said the company is developing a program that will allow Californians to see the projected effects of global warming in communities throughout the state. The "Cal-Adapt" application is still a prototype, and officials anticipate it to be fully functioning by September.

Financial impacts

In addition to environmental impacts, the report included two studies that show California could face enormous financial consequences without any adaptation strategies. A study done by UC Berkeley and the nonprofit Next 10 research organization found that \$2.5 trillion of the state's \$4 trillion in real estate assets are vulnerable to climate change.

Another study by the Pacific Institute estimated that the Bay Area would be most affected by rising sea levels in the state, with San Mateo County facing \$24 billion in costs, Alameda County facing \$15 billion and Marin County \$8.7 billion. San Francisco would see \$4.9 billion in costs in replacement values of buildings and their contents.

Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills (Los Angeles County), who authored the state's landmark greenhouse gas reduction legislation, said it is important to plan for the worst-case scenario.

"The impacts from climate change are happening a lot sooner than any of us predicted," said Pavley, adding that it is important to continue work to reduce California's impact on global warming while "at the same time (preparing for) what it means for California to have a warmer climate."