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Western states plan climate program

Arizona, New Mexico taking steps to cut emissions

By Todd Neff, Camera Staff Writer
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Arizona is preparing a climate change action plan that says the state should cut emissions of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide to 50 percent of 2000 levels by 2040. New Mexico is proposing lowering carbon emissions to 75 percent below 2000 levels by 2050.

Colorado, a climate-science and renewable-energy hub, lacks similar goals.

"Colorado is badly lagging in terms of looking at the potential adverse impacts of global warming and what the state can do to decrease emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases," Howard Geller, executive director of Boulder's Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, said Friday. Geller was among about 150 attending the final day of the University of Colorado law school's "Climate Change and the Future of the American West" conference, hosted by the Natural Resources Law Center.

Ten states have set long-term targets to lower emissions. Arizona aims for such drastic cuts despite its greenhouse gas emissions growing faster than any other state. Unabated, the state's carbon emissions would double by 2040, said Stephen Owens, director of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality. "There's a growing recognition among state officials that if the federal government isn't going to do it, we've got to do it ourselves," Owens said.

Both Owens and Jim Norton, director of New Mexico's Environmental Protection Division, said their states seem to be getting an early taste of what climate models suggest global warming could bring. Arizona is in the grips of a drought that strung together 143 straight days without a hint of rain. "We already know the impacts in Arizona. Our whole damn state's burning up," Owens said.

New Mexico is the first state to join the Chicago Climate Exchange, the continent's only greenhouse-gas emissions-trading program, Norton said. He said two proposed coal-fired power plants might not happen because California refuses to buy energy from "anything dirtier than an IGCC plant," referring to next-generation plants that convert coal to a gas whose carbon can be captured.

Owens also cited efforts of the Western Regional Air Partnership, which includes Colorado and 12 other states that originally came together to cut regional haze. Using private money, the group is working on a western regional greenhouse gas inventory. Colorado is also party to the Western Governors' Association, which has a plan to develop 30,000 megawatts of clean energy in the West by 2015.

While ambitious goals are necessary to mobilize the public, that might be too tall an order, said Tad Patzek, a University of California at Berkeley professor who studies large-scale energy-supply schemes. It would require the equivalent of 40 new coal plants of the size Xcel Energy is building in Pueblo to produce 30,000 megawatts, Patzek said. To produce that much through wind power would require 10 percent of the land in Arizona; that much solar power would require 3,000 square kilometers of solar cells.

"Maybe we need to build far less and encourage the population to live more efficiently," Patzek said.

Several speakers agreed that bold federal action was needed, both in terms of a national carbon-trading program to build the cost of carbon emissions into products and services, as well as in research and development. "We need a factor-of-10 increase in advanced energy research, and investments that span decades and decades," said Roger Pielke Jr., director of CU's Center for Science and Technology Policy Research.

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