Gov. Jerry Brown’s road to the Paris climate talks

By Tom Hayden

October 30, 2015 Updated: October 30, 2015 3:38pm

Gov. Jerry Brown, who will lead a delegation to the climate talks in Paris, has already secured agreements from other states and countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

SACRAMENTO — Ken Alex is a lanky, self-effacing and bearded fellow who heads up the governor’s Office of Planning and Research, an obscure think tank one block from the Capitol’s Dome of Power. He’s been working quietly for two years on what will be big news on the road to the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Paris in December.

I paid attention last year when one Brown administration official told me with a chuckle, “You can’t leave the governor’s office without signing a pact or a memorandum of understanding.” An MOU? What’s more boring than piles of signed agreements that are all ceremony and no sizzle? Jerry Brown himself often regards such paperwork as the enemy of getting things done.

Yet Brown’s enlisting agreements from other states and countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions are so numerous that California is about to nose out the European Union in the number
of climate alliances formed in the run-up to the Paris talks. When I first began writing about this, Brown was having conversations with Oregon, Washington state, British Columbia and Quebec.

Recognizing that California causes only 1.3 percent of the world’s carbon emissions, the Brown administration was forced to invent a “think global, act local” strategy dubbed the “Under 2 MOU,” to reach the mind-bending goal of limiting the average global temperature rise to under 2 degrees Celsius, cutting carbon emissions to 80 to 95 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, or a per capita annual emissions target of less than 2 metric tons.

Let’s skip here from the so-vast-as-to-be-incomprehensible task of slowing climate change to the real accomplishments. Here are the points to understand:

• There are 49 signatories as of Friday, with more being added by the day. The total includes 19 countries on five continents.

• The mushrooming alliance represents 499 million people and an economy (as measured by gross domestic product) of $14.7 trillion. That makes this new Green Giant one of the largest economies in the world.

• If measured by U.S. politics, the covered states represent 349 electoral votes. The presidency is won by 270.

But this is all paper promises, right? No, and take California as an example of facts on the ground.

California has:

• Created some 200,000 jobs in the clean-energy sector since 2002.

• Saved California consumers at least $74 billion since 1977.

• Seen Silicon Valley invest $26 billion in green energy since 2006.

• Increased renewable energy generation 56 percent between 2002 and 2012, including three times more electricity from solar, which is three times greater than the rest of the United States.

• Wind generation jumped fourfold in the same period.

• Cut greenhouse-gas emissions per capita by 17 percent compared with 1990.

• Almost eliminated importing coal, and passed a first-only law this year to divest state pensions from King Coal.
On top of that, the state’s new 2030 goals include seeking to have 50 percent of the California’s electricity generated from renewables, and doubling the energy efficiency of buildings. The state is spending $120 billion on clean energy over four years.

The governor took a blow from the oil lobby this year when his proposed 50 percent cut in petroleum use was rejected as “too much” by Republicans and moderate Democrats fueled by oil donations. “We’ll be better prepared next time,” Alex vows, noting that the oil lobby will have to face a market challenge of $30,000, zero-emission Chevys with a 200-mile range.

The fossil fuel lobby won’t be the only climate-justice enemies in Paris. Alex lists them as Congress, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and especially India, which has opted for cheap coal while increasing is solar capacity. “They can overwhelm the carrying capacity of the biosphere,” Alex warns.

The California delegation to Paris, led by Brown, includes state Senate President Pro Tem Kevin De León, Sens. Ricardo Lara and Fran Pavley, and Assembly members Toni Atkins, Eduardo Garcia and Richard Bloom.

De León’s legislation has pioneered the concept of emission reductions being linked with “co-benefits” for disadvantaged communities, which means billions of dollars in investments in urban areas and the Central Valley.

The Californians are well prepared for the diversity they will engage in Paris. Brown’s Under 2 MOU includes states from Brazil’s rain forest; Jalisco, Mexico; Catalonia, Spain; Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany; and three huge Chinese states. Brown has met with Chinese President Xi Jinping three times, and forged a collaboration to sharply reduce Beijing’s air pollution crisis using the California experience.

Of course, the definition of progress in this fight still means slowing the rate at which the crisis worsens, unless the world is shocked into awakening by popular uprisings and focused action in place after place. As one example of our crisis, more than 100 hundred million California trees are dead or dying as the drought continues and the climate warms.

This may be the time to inspire a determined global green corps, the “guardian angels” summoned by Pope Francis.

Former state Sen. Tom Hayden writes often about California as a green model. He is working on his 19th book, and lives in Los Angeles.