

Connecticut needs a new climate change action plan

Published 5:12 pm, Friday, April 3, 2015

<http://www.ctpost.com/opinion/article/Connecticut-needs-a-new-climate-change-action-plan-6177906.php>

We are among the growing chorus of religious and labor voices joining with traditional environmentalists in calling for urgent action on climate change.

Recently-elected Pope Francis is providing renewed leadership to Catholics -- and to all people of faith -- in deciding to publish a much-anticipated papal encyclical on climate change this summer. The State Council of Machinists was the first of 14 labor organizations in Connecticut to endorse last fall's climate march in New York City. Labor leaders affirm the Catholic church's recognition that the devastating effects of climate change will have a disproportionate impact on working families, the poor and marginalized communities around the world.

At a time when climate change has become one of our nation's most politically polarized issues, we are encouraged by Connecticut's long history of bipartisan leadership in responding to this moral imperative. In 1990, Connecticut became the first state to pass global warming legislation, requiring specific actions for reducing carbon emissions. In 2001, Governor John Rowland established the Governor's Steering Committee on Climate Change.

The Governor's Steering Committee provided leadership in developing the state's Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP), issued in 2005. The plan detailed a wide range of specific policies that together would help reduce the state's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to reach established goals: return to 1990 levels by 2010; and to 10 percent below 1990 levels by 2020.

The Global Warming Solutions Act, signed by Governor Jodi Rell in 2008, incorporated these goals into state law and also established the more ambitious goal of an 80 percent reduction from 2001 levels by 2050.

But the CCAP runs only through 2020, and the state has no concrete plans for reaching that ambitious 2050 goal. What's more, the Governor's Steering Committee has not met since at least 2011.

Twenty-five years of global inaction have created a global climate threat of unprecedented proportions. The sea level rise and extreme weather already impacting Connecticut are nothing compared to what the future will hold unless we and others do our part to set the world on a pathway to dramatically lower GHG emissions. While global cooperation is required to address global warming, national governments are so far failing to adopt the necessary agreements and policies. Therefore, local communities and governments must take the lead and start protecting the climate by reducing GHG emissions locally and regionally.

Connecticut's history of bipartisanship and broad public support for climate action provide an opportunity -- and a moral obligation -- to provide national leadership.

Gov. Malloy has positioned himself as being proactive on climate, and under his leadership the state has indeed made significant progress in a number of areas, including the establishment of the nation's first "green bank" and the rapid expansion of residential solar.

But that's not enough. The state's energy planning documents openly admit we are not on track to meet our mandated climate goals. A recent discussion paper by Labor Network for Sustainability [bit.ly/CT-CCAP2015] highlights the need to reinvigorate the Governor's Steering Committee to lead the development and implementation of an innovative and comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan that will guide the state's efforts to achieve the 2050 emissions reduction goal.

Reaching that goal will require Connecticut to reduce emissions about four times faster over the next 35 years than it has over the past 25. That's difficult but not impossible: Connecticut reduced GHG emissions by about 2% per year from 2004 to 2011.

We join with the Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs in emphasizing that active pursuit of climate protection will also advance other policy goals: energy efficiency, transit-oriented development, improved housing and distributed generation of electricity, all of which create local jobs.

A CCAP should indicate what actions can and should start immediately; what groundwork needs to be laid now for actions to be taken in the future; and what sequencing will optimize workforce, financial, and other benefits and constraints. In particular, the CCAP should lay the groundwork for the growth of a climate-protection economic sector with good, stable jobs for Connecticut's workers.

We can both create good-paying green jobs and fulfill our moral and social obligations to protect the ecosystems that sustain us. We owe it to ourselves, our neighbors, and our world to act quickly to develop a new Climate Change Action Plan for Connecticut.

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