

Clean Energy Strategy Must Map Way To Climate Goal

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SEPTEMBER 5, 2015

Climate is back on the agenda. The Environmental Protection Agency issued its Clean Power Plan to cut greenhouse gas emissions from electricity generation by nearly one-third by 2030. Pope Francis' galvanizing encyclical put climate change on the world's moral agenda. And now Islamic scholars from 20 countries are demanding substantive commitments from the Paris climate negotiations opening Nov. 30.

Meanwhile, global temperatures made July the warmest month ever recorded, and 2015 is on track to be the hottest year. How can Connecticut do its part to help protect ourselves and the world from devastating global warming? One way is to reconsider the state's climate protection strategy.

The core of climate protection is to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy and to increase the efficiency with which we use our energy. Despite recently ramping up our rooftop solar and energy efficiency programs, the state's current energy strategy continues to increase our dependence on fossil fuels, especially natural gas.

Renewable energy sources like wind and solar are becoming cheaper at an extraordinary rate. Clean, local energy resources like shared solar, combined heat and power, geo-targeted energy efficiency and energy storage are increasingly ready to replace traditional, large-scale and top-down production and distribution on the power grid. A new Connecticut strategy will consider the benefits of these clean energy alternatives when evaluating potential investments in regional electricity and gas transmission infrastructure that would lock us into risky dependence on large-scale energy imports for decades to come.

Connecticut just rebooted its climate protection program. On Earth Day, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy appointed a new Governor's Council on Climate Change. He reaffirmed the goal laid out in the Global Warming Solutions Act: an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 2001 levels by 2050. He charged the council to design a plan to meet that 2050 goal and to mobilize our people and institutions to make it happen.

It is easy to talk the climate protection talk while leaving the heavy lifting to future decades. The council will set interim targets to put us on track to meet the 2050 goal. Best would be annual benchmarks with a steady year-on-year rate of reduction that does not force the next generation to make the most significant cuts.

The EPA's new Clean Power Plan offers an opportunity to jump-start our new climate strategy. The Clean Energy Incentive Program will support early investments in renewable energy projects and energy efficiency in low-income communities. That's exactly the directional shift we need for our energy policy.

Meeting our greenhouse gas emission reduction targets will require heavy lifting, but it can also provide important benefits for the people of our state. Phasing out polluting fossil fuel facilities will contribute to improved public health, especially in the low-income communities most vulnerable to such pollution.

A new energy strategy will also provide good, stable jobs in a growing climate protection sector: manufacturing jobs, jobs for those who have been marginalized in the current labor market and jobs for skilled union workers in the construction trades. The governor's council should prioritize creating Connecticut jobs, providing a just transition for any displaced workers and ensuring sustained, orderly development to prevent the boom-and-bust cycles that are devastating for workers and vendors.

The greatest climate protection plan will be pointless if it is not backed by a broad public determination to implement it. Since working families and low-income urban communities face the greatest potential impacts from climate change, the council should ensure the voices of environmental justice communities and labor are fully represented in climate policy deliberations.

Winning the struggle against climate change will require that all of us hold each other and our institutions accountable for setting and achieving ambitious aims. As Gov. Malloy concluded in his remarks to the new council, "we should not waste the opportunity to lead. ... let's get the job done."

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