

## **Getting Ready for Climate Change: California Leads the Way** **by Glenn Scherer**

The state of California just did something neither the Obama administration nor Congress has done: look unflinchingly into the eye of the coming climate-change storm—not with the intent of stopping it—but of economically surviving it.

Rather than passing a weak climate change bill that kowtows to the fossil fuel industry—too little, far too late—Washington should follow California's lead. We *do* need serious greenhouse gas reductions, but there is equal urgency for us to adapt to a near future that could be swept by unpredictable drought, flooding, heat waves and rising seas.

The just released California Natural Resources Agency (CRNA) draft report ([www.climatechange.ca.gov/adaptation/index.html](http://www.climatechange.ca.gov/adaptation/index.html)) was ordered by Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. It warns of the economic consequences of climate inaction, likely in the tens-of-billions of dollars annually—that's just in California. It notes that, of the state's \$4 trillion in real estate assets, \$2.5 trillion are "at risk from extreme weather events, sea level rise, and wildfires."

California offers twelve adaptation strategies to protect its economy, a plan that could be a model for federal climate change adaptation.

First, it proposes the formation of a Climate Adaptation Advisory Panel. A federal version of such a panel would include the best minds of the industrial, banking, insurance, energy, technology, agricultural, and environmental sectors, and use cutting-edge climate science to assess the major economic threats from global warming and recommend risk reduction strategies.

Next, government agencies that regulate public health, infrastructure and habitat would prepare agency-specific climate adaptation plans by September 2010. Individual communities too would be encouraged to shape their own plans.

Then there's water. Our fast evolving climate has already caused increased competition for this finite resource. California's adaptation strategy calls for a "20 percent reduction in per capita water use by 2020," plus improved water quality, water storage, and agricultural water use—excellent goals that safeguard water security.

The plan also sees an end to significant new development in areas likely to be submerged by rising seas or flooded by storm surges. This will be a hardship for the real estate and construction industries, but the alternative is a future in which coastal property losses could bankrupt the insurance industry and the nation.

Greater wildfire danger—especially in the drought-prone West—requires that firefighters "begin immediately to include climate change impact" in their planning.

All new government-funded construction projects and existing assets, such as roads and other vital transportation systems, should also be assessed for climate risk and protected.

Ecosystems should be conserved, not only for wildlife, but to preserve the vital human services they provide against climate change. For example, one lesson learned from Hurricane Katrina was that the loss of shore grasses made flooding worse.

Climate threats to public health, especially to "vulnerable populations and communities" need to be assessed and emergency preparedness measures put in place. One concern is more killer heat waves, with numerous deaths among the urban poor and seniors.

Government “agencies should meet projected population growth and increased energy demand with greater energy conservation and increased use of renewable energy.” Finally, climate change research funding should be increased, with findings funneled directly into civic planning.

All of this, presented today—while the sun shines and our weather world feels safe—will be a hard pill for Americans to swallow. Especially when many legislators continue inhabiting the dream world of climate-change denial.

But the truth is that time has run out. We haven't cut global carbon emissions. In fact, they're growing at rates outstripping the worst scientific projections. Even if we stopped producing greenhouse gases today, we couldn't avoid some climate chaos. But we're still burning fossil fuels like there was no tomorrow, so we better plan for the worst effects.

California's adaptation strategy sounds expensive. But safeguarding economic infrastructure will offer its own economic stimulus. Roads and cities must be hardened against climactic threats, and new energy sources must go online—all of this means new jobs. We can pay for climate security with fair taxes levied against greenhouse gas polluters and ultimately, their customers, us.

By contrast, the cost of denial is high: with much private property and even the American way of life threatened.

Bluntly put, national and international security is endangered far more by climate change than religious extremism. And don't take my word for it; that's the finding of both George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's Department of Defense. As climate change quickens, the U.S. must adapt. Failing that, we could end up in a perpetual state of climate emergency, endangering democracy.

But so long as Washington politicians are beholden to entrenched corporate interests, we cannot hope for real climate security. Unfortunately, the needed response may only come when climate chaos has begun to overwhelm us. Then we'll be playing a game of catch up that is difficult, or impossible, to win.

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