

Climate Change in Georgia

Background

The fact of global climate change has gradually won broad acceptance as a priority public issue among nearly all sectors of the political and economic spectrum. The reality of the worldwide warming trend, now thought to be caused by a complex combination of natural factors and human-originated activities (largely related to the combustion of fossil fuels), could have profound impacts on our local environment as soon as 2020. Among these impacts are coastal flooding and storm-hazards caused by rising sea levels and rising ocean temperature, which is correlated with storm intensity. Computer models of the systems that produce the most threatening symptoms of climate change are not yet precise enough to predict specific consequences by location.

Given the potential risks and the difficulty of forecasting impacts, it is imperative that political decision-makers take steps to reduce harm and to diminish the causes of climate change. As a result of these concerns, some 36 states have adopted or are developing 'climate action plans.' These action plans include a broad array of steps incorporating land-use and transportation policy (to cut back on average travel distance and reduce carbon dioxide emissions), state purchasing policies (to require more recycled products and fewer packaging materials), and capital improvement programs that focus on better energy-efficiency in public buildings and transportation, especially through increasing use of mass-transit systems. Priority is also given to educating the public about the adverse implications of global climate trends and how choices by homeowners and consumers can control them.

Despite the logic of planning for future of changing climate, Georgia's political leadership has been reluctant to do so. In fact, Georgia remains the

only state on the East Coast that has failed to take any substantial initiatives to reduce greenhouse gases. However, Georgia has received federal funds to begin planning to "adapt" to climate change. This entails identifying areas of greatest risk of flooding, erosion, and storm surge and adopting steps to discourage development or active use of these hazardous zones.

We believe this 'do-nothing' position is driven by a woefully misinformed and obsolete belief about the economic consequences of revising public policy to adapt to climate change. Inability to think beyond conventional economic interests, such as generating power from burning fossil fuels and building sprawling subdivisions that require huge amounts of energy, land, and other resources to support, has clouded our leaders' sense of responsibility. Not only is this mindset working against public health, but it is actually contrary to the state's economic interests – both short- and long-term.

This backward thinking seems especially unfounded now that Georgia is benefitting directly from huge investments being made in some of the very technologies that are promoted by policies intended to address climate change. For example, in recent months Georgia has been selected as the location of an experimental facility for producing ethanol from cellulose – organic fibers like switch-grass, wood scrap, and peanut hulls, for which there is now little if any market demand. And a major producer of solar panels just announced plans to build a multi-million dollar plant in Atlanta. The Center and others believe that within five to ten years, these innovative industries are likely to produce far more jobs (and income) than any that will be lost by turning away from technologies that are now major contributors to adverse warming trends.

Center Staff Activities

2011 Update:

As new EPA rules for controlling greenhouse gases go into effect, some Georgia officials are still denying the facts that make these regulations vital to the future of our state and nation. Unlike Texas and Arizona, Georgia has agreed to use state authority to enforce the new limits on emission of carbon dioxide instead of letting EPA do it. While this may be encouraging, we need to be sure that Georgia takes its responsibilities seriously and does not cut corners in "expedited review" of activities that need such permits, like coal-burning power plants.

Likewise, we need to be sure that state decision-makers are kept informed on the latest assessment of how climate change is already affecting coastal areas in the Southeast. For instance, a recent article describes the problems being encountered in North Carolina as a result of sea level rise. [See *Rising waters threaten the coast of North Carolina*, Charlotte Observer, Jan 18, 2011.] The Center recently sent this article to the executive director of the Jekyll Island Authority, advising him that ongoing redevelopment of our barrier island state park should be guided by harsh lessons being learned further up the east coast.

By remaining vigilant, we can help Georgia avoid the worst impacts by ensuring that officials take more timely actions to address climate change. This will require that we convince them of the certain truth – that such steps are essential to Georgia's economic well-being, not at odds with it.

Factors in Climate Change Response by States

- ✓ Broad political support
- ✓ Motivated by economy & environment
- ✓ Combined public policy & tax incentives
- ✓ Comprehensive in scope & goals
- ✓ 36 states now taking action

For more, go to www.pewclimate.org and www.climatestrategies.us