Time for action: regional carbon rules now in play

by Charles Church

Right now, many consider the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) to be the most important program in America for the campaign against global warming.

Amid great fanfare in June, 2001, Governor George E. Pataki announced the formation of the New York State Greenhouse Gas Task Force, noting his commitment to positioning New York "as a national leader on the critically important issue of reducing greenhouse gases."

In early 2003, the Center for Clean Air Policy, in collaboration with the Task Force, issued a report, recommending a two-step process: first, a cap on carbon emissions from New York power generators, then an agreement on regional coordination of state caps.

Given this advice by his own appointees, and the reality that New York state alone contributes almost one percent of the world's — that's right, the world's — total CO_2 emissions, many expected Pataki to put a New York carbon cap into effect without further ado.

But the governor caused a stir by ignoring this advice, announcing instead that he had asked governors in the Northeast to join a regional strategy to develop a market-based cap-and-trade program for CO_2 emissions from power plants.

On September 29, 2003, the commissioners of the environmental agencies of nine member states — the New England states, plus New York, New Jersey and Delaware — adopted the program that is RGGI. RGGI represents the first multi-state compact in the nation intended to reduce CO_2 emissions from power plants. The idea is to curb these emissions by creating a regional market in which power plants can buy and sell CO_2 credits among themselves, as each state works toward complying with the cap.

Under this cap-and-trade program, power plants that keep their emissions below their allowed level would have credits that they could sell, and dirtier plants would be able to buy these credits to meet their obligations. Developers and plant owners would have a financial incentive to build and operate clean, efficient plants, and modernize dirtier plants through cleaner fuels or new equipment.

After this cap-and-trade regimen for power plants has been implemented, the RGGI states may consider expanding the initiative to embrace other sources of greenhouse gases. Moreover, the program design will permit other states seamlessly to join RGGI. (Right now, Pennsylvania and Maryland are participating as observers in RGGI discussions, and one hopes that they soon will become full partners).

The importance of RGGI cannot be overstated. Not only will curtailing CO_2 emissions from the region's power plants be a very important step in reducing America's carbon emissions, but it also will serve as a platform and model for future programs — for example, one put forth by the federal government, if it ever gets its act together. Especially because of its value as precedent, we must not allow a weak RGGI regimen to happen.

What we can do

We can add our voices to those championing meaningful reductions in CO_2 emissions. You can phone or write:

Governor George E. Pataki
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224
518-474-8390

Denise M. Sheehan
Acting Commissioner, DEC
625 Broadway
Albany, New York 12233
518-402-8540

The original agreement called for completion of the program design by April, 2005, at the outside. That goal was not achieved (no surprise there), but the current prediction fixes September or October, 2005, as real and achievable dates.

Environmental Advocates of New York (EANY), doing very fine work indeed, has assembled a vast coalition of environmental, religious and health-related groups to put forward a set of sound principles for RGGI. Among these, naturally, the level of the proposed reductions in carbon emissions in the region has great importance. The coalition urges that these reductions be set at 10% below current levels by 2010, and 25% by 2020. Right now, the RGGI states are considering cap levels that are nowhere near these.

I have forcefully advocated for Sierra Club itself to get into the fray by joining EANY's coalition with all the tub thumping we can muster. However, right now an existing formal policy against "pollution trading" stands in the way. The policy document, by my lights, is a sorry piece of work. It devotes more than a printed page (single-spaced) to defining the conditions under which a trading policy would be all right. However, all this carefully wrought prose is preceded by these six words: "The Sierra Club opposes use of (pollution) trading." Hence the big question: if all trading is forbidden, why all the verbiage on when trading would be okay?

I'm thinking that the policy must be amended, to give trading of CO_2 emissions the separate attention it deserves. (To be clear, I am not now urging that the current ban on "pollution trading" be changed in other respects.) Such an amendment would be far from a blank check; instead it would carefully delineate the situations in which such trading would be approved, perhaps even supported wholeheartedly.

Right now, what we can do here in New York is call or write Governor Pataki and Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Denise Sheehan, urging them to work harder for more meaningful reductions in carbon emissions than they are now considering. Postcard campaigns would be terrific. These reduction levels are in play right now, so we all need to act fast.

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