



GUEST VIEW

Rhode Island has a major stake in control of greenhouse gases

By Ronan Roche

As a coastal state, Rhode Island has more reason to be concerned with global climate change than most. If the sea level continues to rise by one foot per century — the rate actually recorded at Newport — all of Rhode Island's low-lying coastal areas (76 percent of the shoreline) could be adversely affected. Many experts believe the chances of a major hurricane reaching New England also are likely to be increased.

Erosion rates and loss of land — private and public — to the sea would increase. A general elevation in the water table also could result from sea-level rise, leading to the failure of both septic systems and storm drains, which need to be located at a certain elevation above the water table. Elevation of the water table would also affect the river drainage systems of the state by slowing down runoff and increasing the risk of flooding.

So how are efforts to tackle global warming coming along? Two important meetings were held recently dealing with an issue that has international importance, but also directly impacts Rhode Island.

The recent U.N. climate change talks in Montreal on the future of the Kyoto greenhouse gas reduction agreement have concluded, and the delegates of most industrialized countries already signed on to the Kyoto Protocol have gone home declaring the talks a success, largely because they voted to continue to set greenhouse gas reduction targets beyond 2012, when current arrangements expire. The Bush administration received widespread international criticism



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for failing to engage in the Kyoto process. It was only in the final hours of the talks that the U.S. delegation accepted an agreement to join a preliminary discussion on future measures to slow global warming, and then only on condition that it rule out "negotiations leading to new commitment" to reduce greenhouse gases.

This is a bizarre position to take, considering the remarkable events of 2005. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita battered the Gulf Coast with devastating effect, and the total number of hurricanes during the season was the highest since recording began in 1851. It also looks like 2005 will turn out to be the hottest on record, according to NASA calculations.

Closer to home, in a clear split from federal policy, the Regional

Greenhouse Gas Initiative has been working since 2003 on what would be the first multi-state program in the nation to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide. The states involved are New Jersey, Delaware, New York and the six New England states. Talks during December ran into problems, with Rhode Island and Massachusetts unwilling to sign on to the current proposal. On the table was a measure that would freeze utility emissions at current levels through 2015, and then require a 10 percent reduction by 2020. This would be a major step forward, bringing the region more in line with international measures such as the Kyoto Protocol, and would increase pressure on the federal government to follow suit.

The initiative isn't being thrown out the window, as all of the other states involved have signed a memorandum of understanding and now have three months to release detailed rules for the program. The failure of Rhode Island and Massachusetts to actively implement the program so far is a serious blow, since many involved had hoped to be able to make a positive unified regional announcement to contrast to the U.S. stance in Montreal.

With the federal government efforts practically nonexistent, and state-led initiatives faltering, it falls to individuals to take action. Measures improving energy efficiency in the home, such as increasing insulation, are an important part of the strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and over the long term will save consumers money and mitigate rising electricity costs. Householders can also

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choose to have their electricity supplied from renewable sources with a switch to renewable energy providers. The more people choose to switch, the less fluctuations in oil and gas prices matter, and the more inexpensive the renewable supplies become.

The broader picture is that methods of energy generation that produce greenhouse gases are going to be increasingly expensive in the future, because of the rising cost of the raw materials, and as regulations become increasingly arduous for companies to comply with. Investors already are assessing the impacts of emissions regulations on global companies. Renewable energy is now competing on a progressively level-playing field, and looks more attractive than ever. It is in its implementation where the long-term battle against global warming will be won or lost.

Rhode Island has a lot at stake with respect to climate change and sea level rise, and it behooves us to lead rather than follow.

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