

State commission grapples with climate change

By L. PRESTON BRYANT JR.

FEW ENVIRONMENTAL issues have gripped our national conscience like global warming. School-age kids, college students, baby boomers, and seniors alike are increasingly aware of the climate-change phenomenon. And as climatological research is refined, a growing majority is more and more accepting of the science behind it.

Indeed, when Gov. Timothy M. Kaine addressed the first meeting of his recently appointed climate change commission, he alluded to this growing awareness, calling global warming “the environmental issue of this and the next generation.”

Virginia’s contributions to global warming can be calculated. The impacts of climate change on our citizens, environment and economy can be assessed. And with these calculations and assessments, we have the fundamentals to begin developing strategies to deal with it all – which is precisely the goal of the governor’s commission.

What we know preliminarily is this: Greenhouse gases in Virginia come mostly from power plants and motor vehicles, with each contributing roughly a third of all emissions. The remaining third comes from industrial and manufacturing processes, solid waste disposal and agriculture. All totaled, according to the Department of Environmental Quality, Virginia produces approximately 181 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, ranking us 17th among states. Such was sufficient to inspire Gov. Kaine last summer to call for a greenhouse gas-reduction goal of 30 percent by 2025, returning emissions to 2000 levels.

Still, there are some who ask why Virginia should study that which is a global issue. There are several answers to that question.

First, Virginia is a coastal state, thereby requiring policymakers to at

least assess how warming ocean temperature and resulting sea-level rise might impact our coastal resources and economy. Virginia has nearly 3,500 miles of coastline and tidal shoreline, much of which borders the most ecologically diverse wetlands and estuary in North America. Our coastal region also is home to hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of personal property and commercial, industrial, and military infrastructure.

Second, we have interior regions that comprise economically and ecologically important natural areas and working farm and forest lands. Warmer temperatures will impact the vegetation and wildlife that are part of the human food chain. We need to know how.

Last, states’ actions can indeed impact the global warming phenomenon. According to the World Resources Institute, greenhouse gas emissions from Virginia and the Carolinas are equivalent to industrialized South Korea’s emissions. The Northeastern states’ emissions equal Canada’s. And the output from just 10 mostly Midwestern states equals that of India, who we know to be one of the world’s leading contributors to global warming. So, yes, states’ actions to curb greenhouse gases can be globally significant.

The governor created a climate change commission that is balanced in composition and mission. It is composed of scientists, economists, environmental advocates, land-use experts, local and state policymakers, and representatives from the energy, transportation, manufacturing, and development sectors, among others. It has identifiable Republicans and Democrats, and many whose party affiliation is entirely unknown.

The commission will assess the



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likely impacts of climate change on Virginians’ health, natural resources and economy. It also will develop strategies to meet the governor’s greenhouse gas-reduction goal so that we might adapt to – and hopefully mitigate and play a role in halting – global warming’s effects on the Old Dominion and beyond.

Equally important to the commission is the need to understand the costs – real, societal, and otherwise – to greenhouse gas-reduction strategies it might recommend. If we are to encourage homeowners to install energy-saving light bulbs, we should know the costs and benefits. If major utilities are to be required to install emissions-reducing technologies, we want to know what it will mean to both our heating bills and environment. If our cars are to be increasingly eco-friendly, we should know not only the sticker price effects but how it will improve our air.

Further, if we do absolutely nothing to reduce greenhouse gases in Virginia – thus letting global warming’s effects on our health, environment, and economy go unchecked – then we need to know those costs, too.

Gov. Kaine has said numerous times that he prefers a coherent, workable national policy to address global warming rather than single-state or regional approaches. And if such were to be market-based, rather than overly regulatory, all the better. Unfortunately, no one sees a coherent, workable federal policy anywhere in the offing. That is why localities, states, and regions are stepping up to the plate.

Gov. Kaine’s climate change commission will meet nine times over the course of the year. Its meetings will be held around the state, mostly at universities. Public input is actively sought. Its report and recommendations to the governor are due by mid-December.

About the author

L. Preston Bryant Jr. is Virginia’s secretary of natural resources and chairman of Gov. Tim Kaine’s climate change commission.