



By Linda K. Breggin

Are State Climate Efforts on Wane?

A recent survey raises questions about how the public views the role of states in addressing climate change. In a March report, professors Barry Rabe (University of Michigan) and Christopher Borick (Muhlenberg College) present data from the National Surveys on Energy and the Environment collected between fall 2008 and fall 2013. The telephone surveys asked for responses to the following statement: "If the federal government fails to address the issue of global warming it is my state's responsibility to address the problem."

In 2008, 70 percent of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement. By last year only 50 percent strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, with only 19 percent in strong agreement, as compared to 41 percent in 2008. The authors emphasize that "most Americans still prefer an active role for states in the pursuit of greenhouse gas reductions," but high levels of public support have "waned."

They also found decreased overall support for specific state policy tools, including: fossil fuel taxes (down from 37 percent to 24 percent); gas tax increases (from 23 percent to 17 percent); renewable portfolio standards (from 82 percent to 79 percent); and state-developed cap-and-trade systems (from 55 percent to 32 percent).

The authors attribute the change to an increase in federal actions: "Despite the absence of far-reaching federal legislation, a number of federal initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in recent years have tended to marginalize state policy initiative and expansion."

The Center for Climate and Energy Solution's Manik Roy opines that when the survey started, states needed to set an example for the federal government. Now that federal agencies are taking steps to address climate change, Roy is not surprised that respondents are less likely to say their states should act. He explains that the survey statement supposes that the federal government is not addressing global warming, but it is often difficult for respondents to assume the counterfactual. Furthermore, he theorizes that the high percentage of 2008 respondents who strongly agreed with the statement may have had more of a sense of urgency than the 2013 respondents under a Democratic president who has pledged to address climate change.

Similarly, Georgetown Climate Center's Vicki Arroyo isn't sure the poll indicates a major shift in public support for state action: "Our own polling and Stanford University's polling show that support is strong for action on climate change. Support is strongest for federal action that builds on state action."

In addition to reporting the survey data, Rabe and Borick conclude that the decrease in support "coincides with a stalling or reversal of state policy development." They cite the following examples: no new state renewable electricity mandates since 2008, and recent efforts to roll back existing requirements; only 10 states participating in regional cap-and-trade programs although over 20 states indicated commitment to such programs in 2008; and reluctance on the part of

states to establish new energy taxes or increase fossil fuel taxes.

Arroyo disagrees that state action has stalled and asserts that "while administrations and policies change, few states are pulling back." She ticks off a list of ongoing state efforts that include: tightened caps on power sector emissions under the market-based Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, several strengthened state renewable portfolio standards, California's low carbon fuel standard (which if successfully defended in the courts will serve as a model for other states), a plethora of electric vehicle initiatives, and a four-year effort in which states from the District of Columbia to Maine are working on a bipartisan basis to reduce transportation sector emissions and energy use.

Regardless of how the survey results are interpreted, however, there seems to be agreement that the state role in addressing global warming is about to change. Rabe and Borick note that a federal "strategy of using the Clean Air

A survey says support for state programs is declining, but there is more to the data

Act to reduce power-sector emissions could be creating incentives for states to engage more actively and seek federal credits for early emissions reductions."

Roy agrees, noting that as EPA moves forward, states won't be as focused on the need to be out in front and instead will be figuring out what tools to use to meet federal requirements.

And Bill Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, says the shift in state focus will lead to a significant increase in public support for addressing global warming, because in implementing the federal rules states will "demonstrate that protecting the public and the economy are not mutually exclusive."

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