

February 19, 2008

I write to you today about a myth, a challenge, and an opportunity. The myth is that there is no immediate need to address local contributions to global warming. The challenge is to take action today and at every level to address global warming. And the opportunity, particularly for local government, is to be an active force in the fight against global warming by asking the hard questions, seeking the best information, and making the sound decisions that will move California to a low-carbon future. As part of this opportunity, I invite you to attend one of a series of workshops that I will co-host with the Local Government Commission this spring.

The Myth

There no longer is serious debate that global temperatures are rising and that human activities play an important role. We already are seeing the effects – disappearing glaciers, shrinking snow pack, droughts, coastal erosion, bigger and more regular storms, and more extreme heat waves. But some continue to suggest that we can afford to wait to take action. That until all the prescriptive rules are in place at the state and federal level, we can proceed with business as usual. We do not have this luxury. The best available science tells us that the effects from global warming will intensify and spread if we do not take decisive, dramatic action today. As the chairman of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently declared: “If there’s no action before 2012, that’s too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future.”

The Challenge

In California, we have recognized the urgent need to curb greenhouse gas emissions by committing to reduce emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, and to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. However, even under the aggressive timetable that the Governor and Legislature have set, most of the rules being developed to reach these targets will not take effect until 2012. A tremendous amount of local and regional planning will occur between now and then. We will experience the effects of the decisions made today well into the future. Our challenge is to ensure that the planning occurring now allows us to meet the goals we have set for ourselves.

Fortunately, local agencies have at their disposal an extremely powerful tool. CEQA requires public agencies to mitigate or avoid “significant effects on the environment” when it is feasible to do so. As the Legislature recognized last year when it enacted Senate Bill No. 97, greenhouse gas emissions are the type of environmental effect that agencies must address under CEQA. Throughout California, cities, counties, and regional planning entities have begun to address global warming as an integral part of their planning efforts, as CEQA requires, even in the absence of regulatory thresholds of significance.

To assist in this effort, my office has compiled and regularly updates a document that may be helpful for agencies in carrying out their obligations under CEQA. The most recent version, available at <http://ag.ca.gov/globalwarming/ceqa.php>, lists examples of mitigation measures that may be appropriate for a broad range of projects – from specific developments to general plans and regional plans. The document also provides links to sources of information on global warming impacts and mitigation measures. I encourage you to take a look.

The Opportunity

Many agencies have questions about how to address global warming through the CEQA process. These may include: “How do we prepare an inventory of baseline greenhouse gas emissions?” “How do we model future emissions?” “What kinds of mitigation must we consider?” While each agency initially must answer these questions for itself, we can learn from each other.

With these questions in mind, my office and the Local Government Commission will host a series of workshops entitled “CEQA and Climate Change: Partnering with Local Agencies to Combat Global Warming.” Speakers will include myself and members of my office, leaders from the Governor's Climate Action Team, and modeling experts from around the State. The material covered at each workshop will be similar, but will be tailored to highlight innovative approaches in each region. We aim to provide concrete tips for addressing global warming in CEQA documents, and to foster discussion about experiences so far. Workshop dates are:

March 20, Oakland
April 3, Sacramento
April 24, Visalia

May 15, Los Angeles
May 23, Monterey

Information about the workshops and registration is available at www.lgc.org.

I look forward to working together as we create a low-carbon future in California.

Sincerely,

EDMUND G. BROWN JR.
Attorney General