

As nations talk, California shows how states and cities can cut emissions

December 8 2015, by Cathy Cockrell



Ethan Elkind

As part of its mission, UC Berkeley's Center for Law, Energy and the Environment makes policy recommendations—based on consultation with business and government leaders—to help California meet its ambitious climate goals while growing its economy.

Ethan Elkind, the associate director of CLEE's [climate change](#) and business initiative, is in Paris for the 2015 U.N. climate summit (COP21). There, he's promoting a California-led effort to get subnational entities to commit to aggressive reductions in their greenhouse gas emissions. Events connected to the burgeoning network,

referred to as "Under 2 MOU," include a signing ceremony for new members and a luncheon hosted by Gov. Jerry Brown and U.S. Ambassador to France Jane Hartley.

Berkeley News spoke with Elkind as he prepared to leave for Paris.

Why is it important to organize cities and states, not just nations, around climate change?

We're working to get cities, or states within countries, to pledge to even greater greenhouse gas emission reductions than are being discussed at the U.N. climate summit, and to organize those entities into one cohesive entity. By doing so we can provide a more aggressive baseline for international negotiators, as well as organized political momentum to encourage them to be more aggressive. This is also a great way to get cities and states to share information and best practices and to coordinate policy responses to climate change.

So while Under 2 MOU will hold events in Paris, it's really about creating a network going forward?

Absolutely. This is not just about pushing the negotiators at this year's COP; there's going to be a COP next year and the year after. So it's an ongoing effort, and we're excited to help the governor's office to move it forward.

As the summit opened, Under 2 MOU had 57 signatories from 19 countries (with more on the way), all agreeing to limit their emissions. These entities represent 572 million people and a combined [gross national product](#) of more than \$17.5 trillion. If it were a single country, it would be the largest economy in the world.

Could you elaborate on California's leadership around climate change?

In 2006, California passed the first-in-the-nation law to limit our [greenhouse gas](#) emissions. Since then we've embarked on a suite of measures—investments, policies and programs—to bring down our carbon emissions. So far it's been an interesting success story, and a great example for the international community, demonstrating that you can decarbonize and still increase economic growth.

We're on pace to dramatically bolster our renewable energy supply. We have a very aggressive goal to get to 50 percent renewables by 2030, and we're learning how to site these facilities better and to integrate the variable energy generated by solar and wind facilities. In terms of petroleum usage, California has 40 percent of the electric vehicle sales in the country, as well as strong sales of hybrid cars. We have some good state programs to encourage electric vehicle ownership.

On storage of surplus solar and wind energy, we have the only mandates in the country for utilities to buy a certain amount of energy storage. We're seeing a huge growth in standalone batteries and other technologies, and we're trying to build high-speed rail and to electrify more of our transportation. On energy efficiency, we have goals to double the efficiency of our existing buildings by 2030.

Are there any important concerns or issues that you feel are getting short shrift in the coverage of the COP21?

I've been a bit of a skeptic of the international process, because it's not been clear to me that the international negotiators can influence what Congress or parliaments around the world can do. Ultimately we need

those entities to vote for policies like carbon pricing and encouraging clean-technology deployment. So to me the real question is, can they craft an agreement that's not just symbolic or voluntary, but results in meaningful, on-the-ground changes? I'm curious to see how that plays out.

Of course climate change is a global problem, so it can't hurt to have an agreement, no matter what form it takes. A strong commitment from the international community carries a lot of political weight. The Republicans in Congress, for example, are saying, "Why should we do anything on this if China and India are not doing anything?" Having more global cooperation takes the air out of those arguments.

In terms of issues that are underreported, there's one other thing to keep an eye on, which is that international trade agreements under discussion, for example the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, could potentially undermine what happens in Paris. Under those trade agreements, there may be greater recourse for companies to challenge domestic environmental laws.

You mentioned the Republican Congress. That's a general concern, isn't it, that commitments coming out of COP21 may be blocked or stalled once international negotiators return home?

That's always looming, and for the U.S., President Obama has been addressing that dynamic. The Republicans can try to interrupt some of the momentum, but a lot of climate-related measures are independently authorized and are going to be happening over a number of years. There's only so much that the Republican Congress can do.

Under a 2007 Supreme Court decision, the United States is required to

tackle [carbon emissions](#) nationally via the Clean Air Act. So we have the EPA regulating [greenhouse gas emissions](#) from the electricity sector. Those rules will be litigated, but we have that approach. We also have other programs to boost clean energy: tax credits for solar and for electric vehicle purchases, for example, and investments in R&D on clean technologies. And then we have what individual states, such as California and Hawaii, are doing.

What are you looking forward to in Paris?

I'm the lone CLEE representative to this event, but many people from the California environmental community will be there. I look forward to meeting with them, but also to meeting new people from all around the world. What California is doing is a great success story, but we can't be too parochial; we have a lot we can learn from others. I'm hoping to take those lessons back home.

More information: "Planting Fuels: How California Can Boost Local, Low-Carbon Biofuel Production," [www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content ... 1/Planting-Fuels.pdf](http://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Planting-Fuels.pdf)

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: As nations talk, California shows how states and cities can cut emissions (2015, December 8) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-12-nations-california-states-cities-emissions.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--