

Global Warming and New York State

The news has been dominated this summer by stories on terrorism, war in the Middle East, pending economic stagnation in the U.S and the potential impacts of global climate change. A closer look at all of these issues reveals that there common threads among them that have to do with energy use and production. The vast majority of the world's leading scientists now agree that human activities, most notably the burning of carbon based fuels, are leading to significant impacts on the global climate. In the U.S. we find ourselves in the daunting position of having to redesign our economy and way of life for a future that will not be run on inexpensive fossil fuels. Just think of all of the ways our society has become a product of relatively inexpensive petroleum that comes mainly from non-domestic sources; from the development of suburbs that require long commutes to places of work, building of larger and larger homes in areas of the country that require either lots of heat in the winter or lots of cooling in the summer and an agricultural system that is heavily reliant on trucking produce long distances with heavy inputs of petroleum based pesticides and fertilizers. This is, of course, a bit of an oversimplification but illustrates that the task ahead will require fundamental shifts in how we live and work, recreate and how we define quality of life.

According to the California-based organization Redefining Progress the impacts of global climate change on New York State could be severe. If major changes in greenhouse gas emissions are not undertaken we can look forward to summer heat in New York City similar to what Atlanta, Georgia now experiences, increased heat related deaths, reduced water quality in the Great Lakes and increased illness from insect-borne diseases. New York agriculture would also be hit hard with increasing soil temperatures and evaporation requiring major investments in irrigation systems in order to keep crops viable. Although climate projects show likely increases in precipitation it is likely to take the form of more frequent intense rainfall that leads to flooding and soil erosion.

There are solutions and opportunities presented by every challenge and this situation is no different. One innovative federal approach currently on the table is the "Climate Stewardship Act" proposed by Republic U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut. The Act would, among other things, create a market based cap and trade system designed to create financial incentives for reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat trapping gasses, covering 85% of the nation's emissions. A study by Redefining Progress estimates that this approach of using government incentives to promote conversion to a more "climate friendly" economy could produce 250 billion in benefits at a cost of 150 billion and create 100,000 new jobs by 2015. In New York State the effects could be a net increase in jobs of over 6,000, an increased demand for agricultural products used to make bio-energy and an increase in local production of energy through wind and solar.

It is clear to the vast majority of scientists and more and more so our political leaders that we are moving past the "oil age" and are at the beginning of a new era that will be based on the need to re-scale our communities and lifestyles and to some extent our consumption patterns. New York State is well positioned to be a leader in this new era and the time to embrace the change and start investing in the "greener" economy of the 21st century is upon us. For more information on this issue of global warming and New York State visit the Redefining Progress website at <http://www.rprogress.org/>

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