

CLIMATE

11 CHAPTER

AS WITH SO MANY SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED STATES, SOLUTIONS TO CLIMATE CHANGE ARE LIKELY TO COME THANKS TO STATE AND LOCAL EFFORTS TO DRIVE INNOVATION AND ENGAGE ORDINARY PEOPLE BY MAKING CLIMATE CHANGE RELEVANT TO EVERYDAY LIFE – A TASK THAT BECOMES DISMAYINGLY EASIER AS CLIMATE CHANGE ADVANCES.

THE BIG PROBLEM

“The earth is going to do what the earth is going to do,” declares Ken Isaksson, an employee at a fish hatchery in Aberdeen, Washington. “Climate change is real. It’s not going to go away. We’re not going to be able to stop it, and we’re not going to be able to reverse it. We just have to accept it and do the best we can,” he says.



 Ken Isaksson, Aberdeen, Washington

But despite his fatalism, Isaksson says he supports a global response to the problem.

Americans are divided about the causes of climate change. Forty-eight percent believe humans are the culprit, while 31 percent blame natural causes.¹

Further complicating efforts to battle climate change is the fact that even those who believe it is man-made see themselves as powerless to stop it.

KC Golden, a senior policy adviser at the Climate Solutions environmental group in Seattle, says that after “An Inconvenient Truth,” Al Gore’s 2006 documentary, came out, “It was clear that people were scared, but not activated because ... they felt like it was too big, it wasn’t in their scope of effectiveness.” Since then, environmental groups have become more effective at helping people understand how they can make an impact. “Of course, nothing we can do within our individual sphere by itself is helpful or effective and so a lot of the key is what do we do together,” Golden says.



 Sasha Pollack, Seattle, Washington

Sasha Pollack, a program director at the Washington Environmental Council, also in Seattle, says it’s difficult to get people to see the urgency of an evolving problem like climate change. “Everybody’s got other things on their plate, so getting somebody engaged in fighting for a carbon tax, for example, or some other policy that will



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————— *KC Golden*

dramatically impact things in the long run, but may not have such a good benefit that they can see in the short run, is harder,” she says.

THE LOCAL PROBLEM

Discrete, local issues are a much easier sell for environmentalists, Pollack says. “People are ... incredibly compelled to engage [with] something that they think will harm their way of life ... directly,” she asserts, citing the example of trains with oil tanks running by schools and through neighborhoods.

As climate change advances, however, effects that were once considered long-term are become more immediate and are affecting people’s daily lives.

“I’m not sure that we understand it. I don’t think it’s all man-made.”

————— *Joe Wardy*

Joe Wardy is the president of the Hub of Human Innovation, a startup incubator, and the former mayor of El Paso, Texas, where summer temperatures reached 108

degrees Fahrenheit in 2016.² The city is located deep in the Chihuahuan Desert, on the U.S. border with Mexico, and Wardy says officials have “taken good steps” to ensure an adequate supply of clean drinking water, including opening a desalination plant, but the risk of a crisis remains. Although he says he believes climate change is happening, he says, “I’m not sure that we understand it. I don’t think it’s all man-made.”



▲ Clarinda Underwood, Quinault Nation, Washington

Nearly 2,000 miles northwest of El Paso, on the Native American Quinault Reservation in Washington state, water is an issue too, although of a different sort. A major glacier that used to feed the Quinault River has

disappeared, leaving the river too warm for salmon to survive, explains Clarinda Underwood, a member of the Quinault Tribal Council.³ As the summers get hotter, she explains, “our waters heat up ... and [the fish] can’t survive.” Not only is salmon fishing an important part of Quinault lifestyle, Underwood says her tribe relies on the profits it makes from selling its catch of coho and sockeye salmon, which have become scarce. The tribe has taken measures, including the construction of log jams, to stop the fish from dying off entirely.

“We’re losing 4 inches of land every year as the ocean keeps approaching us, so that’s a little bit scary for me and knowing that there’s so much that we need to do.”

————— *Clarinda Underwood*

Salmon are not the tribe’s only climate-related problem. Rising sea levels threaten the reservation’s central village, which sits on the Pacific coast. Although they have built a seawall to protect the village, Underwood says, “If you have 9-, 10-foot waves, it’s going to come over, no doubt about that. We have so much erosion. We’re losing 4 inches of land every year as the ocean keeps approaching us, so that’s a little bit scary for me and knowing that there’s so much that we need to do.” The tribe is petitioning the U.S. government for funds to help move the village to higher land.

LOCAL SOLUTIONS



 Joseph DiChiaro III, Seattle, Washington

The federal government may be slow to adopt sweeping environmental protection legislation, but much of the policymaking is happening at the local and state level. Washington state, along with its neighbors on the Pacific coast, Oregon and California, has passed significant environmental legislation, for example limiting auto emissions. KC Golden explains:

“So much of the positive change that we’ve seen in the last five or six years on climate change in the U.S. and elsewhere has been citizen-led, has been community-led. For instance, he says, “All of the power being provided to this room and to every room in the city of Seattle is carbon-free. That was about citizens coming together and saying, ‘Not only am I going to change my lightbulb, but we [can also impact] public utility [companies].”





“Virtually all of the auto manufacturing companies have moved from Detroit to Alabama because ... there’s very little regulation relative to environmental issues.”

————— Lecia Brooks

Washington is a particularly green state not only because its citizens are engaged but also because they are well-organized, observes Joseph DiChiaro III, executive director of EarthShare Washington. “We have a very vibrant nonprofit community, probably one of the most active and forward-thinking in the country,” he says. Those groups have a highly educated, receptive audience, putting the state “in a fortunate position to deal with very difficult issues,” DiChiaro says.

Nonprofits are not the only green champions in Seattle. Microsoft, for example, “has implemented an internal carbon tax,” Pollack explains, saying the company understands that “their employees want to work in a place that they can feel good about, and that’s consistently something that drives business.”

REGULATION

A very different philosophy prevails in conservative states, especially in the South. Lecia Brooks, director of the Civil Rights Museum and Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, is frustrated that her state’s Republican governor “won’t talk about climate change.” She says many corporations take advantage of the state’s lax environmental regulations. “Virtually all of the auto manufacturing companies have moved from Detroit to Alabama

because ... there’s very little regulation relative to environmental issues.”



 Ben Haynes, Cullman, Alabama

While some state governors fight for more environmental regulation, others deny that climate change is a problem. This leaves significant room for corporations, particularly major polluters, to choose the regulatory environment that best suits their needs. Without a unified approach, Washington state’s efforts may be offset by the pollution in other states.

The playing field is uneven not only within the United States. Cattle farmer Ben Haynes in Cullman, Alabama,

does not oppose environmental regulation on agriculture, but says other nations are not “being held to the same standards as we are, environmentally [and] from a food-safety standpoint.”

“We see other countries that are able to use techniques and products that we’re not able to use,” Haynes says. “We’re OK not using those, most of the time, because we feel like there’s science and sound backing for not using some of those products. But we know that in other countries, maybe, those products are available.”

THE COST

One widespread concern about environmental regulation and protection is its financial cost. El Paso resident Annie Beach would like to see residents of her city, nicknamed “Sun City,” install more solar panels, but she realizes that is out of reach for many. “It costs a lot of money to [install solar panels]. Once you get started then you can save money in the end, but I think that’s a hindrance for people trying [to do something better] for the environment because it costs them money.”



 Kimberly Larson, Seattle, Washington

Kimberly Larson, director of communications at Seattle’s Climate Solutions, says many Americans believe that environmentalism “is for the white liberal elite.” She asks, “Could the ... lower income single mom afford an electric car? [And go] where she needs to go to get her kids around and go to her job?” Larson notes that lower-income Americans often have longer commutes, making the range of an electric car a further concern. However, despite some green technology being expensive, she believes all can participate in the green movement in different ways. The movement, she explains, is relevant to all Americans.



 KC Golden, Seattle, Washington

KC Golden acknowledges that “any transition, even a great one like a transition to a clean energy future” can be a challenge for “people who struggle economically.” But he says, “You can make the case that the clean energy economy will produce far more and better share the prosperity than the fossil fuel economy ever could or would or did. I think that’s a very easy case to make. [However] it’s a big transition and this country [is] not great at bringing everybody along.”

In addition, environmentalists still struggle against the notion that environmental protections kill jobs. “The jobs versus the environment trope that has been around forever is something we always find ourselves having to fight against and push against,” Pollack says.

In Washington state, Larson says, the timber industry purposefully blames environmental regulations instead of mechanization for the loss of jobs. The industry has tried to “divert the attention away from the fact that they’re reducing jobs because they want to streamline costs and make more profit,” she says.

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New jobs in sectors like renewable energy may be able to offset losses in timber and fossil fuel industries, eas-

ing the transition. The trade-off between jobs and protecting the environment, both experts argue, is a fallacy.

URBAN VS. RURAL

On climate change, the opinion divide is not just region vs. region, but also rural vs. urban. For instance, Seattle was the country's fastest-growing big city last year, fueling a debate about how the environmental effects of that growth should be handled.⁴

Many people move to Seattle to enjoy the state's natural beauty, Joseph DiChiaro says. But as the economy booms some worry that the increasing traffic and construction threaten air and water quality, and he says many residents are starting to ask, "Are we going to start having encroachment on surrounding green space and rural areas because we need to grow somewhere?" DiChiaro says the city has been slow to address these questions, "but they're rapidly trying to catch up."

Meanwhile, Isaksson, the fish hatchery worker in Aberdeen, says urban centers are eager to preserve the

state's beautiful coniferous forests and stunning coastal vistas but "don't want to ... tear up their pavement, tear down their house, plant native grasses and move away from the lakes and the streams. They would rather that the rural communities take the brunt of that. They'd rather point the finger at logging or other commercial industries. ... It's not fair. ... I understand why it sells, but it's not realistic."

PARIS

Although the United States would be significantly more effective at mitigating the effects of climate change if it worked together as one nation and with the international community, President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement does not signal the end to progress on such issues in America. As with so many seemingly intractable problems in the United States, solutions are likely to come thanks to state and local efforts to drive innovation and engage ordinary people by making climate change relevant to everyday life – a task that becomes dismayingly easier as climate change advances.



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