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Cities, States Aren't Waiting For U.S. Action on Climate
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With Washington lawmakers deadlocked on how best to curb global warming, state and local officials across the country are adopting ambitious policies and forming international alliances aimed at reducing greenhouse gases.

The initiatives, which include demands that utilities generate some of their energy using renewable sources and mandates for a reduction in emissions from motor vehicles, have emboldened clean-air advocates who hope they will form the basis for broader national action. But in the meantime, some businesses say the local and state actions are creating a patchwork of regulations that they must contend with.

This flurry of action is part of a growing movement among state and local leaders who have given up hope that Congress and the administration will tackle major issues, and are launching their own initiatives on immigration, stem cell research and energy policy. Last week alone, former president Bill Clinton launched
an effort with 22 of the world's largest cities to cut their emissions, while California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) and British Prime Minister Tony Blair said they will explore trading carbon dioxide pollution credits across the Atlantic.

Recently, 22 states and the District of Columbia have set standards demanding that utilities generate a specific amount of energy -- in some cases, as high as 33 percent -- from renewable sources by 2020. And 11 states have set goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

California also has passed legislation mandating that automakers reduce their vehicles' carbon dioxide emissions 30 percent by 2016, and 10 other states have committed to adopt the same standards if the law survives a court challenge.

In addition, as many as 10 states in the Northeast are working to establish state-by-state ceilings for carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, and allow industries such as power plants to trade pollution credits for carbon emissions while cutting greenhouse gas emissions 10 percent by 2019. California, Oregon and Washington are negotiating a similar pact.

Some local officials said they are pushing ahead with plans because the Bush administration, which has promoted cleaner technology but opposes mandatory curbs on greenhouse gas emissions, has failed to adequately address the problem.

"Like most mayors, I'm disappointed the federal government has not taken more of a lead on this issue, but so be it. We're moving forward," said Albuquerque Mayor Martin J. Chavez, who is expanding public transportation in his city and has persuaded some other U.S. mayors to pledge to make their cities' buildings carbon-neutral by 2030, meaning their net carbon dioxide emissions would be zero.

But some experts say there is a political imperative at work, as well. Tim Profeta, who worked for Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) before leaving last year to direct Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, said local politicians feel greater pressure to address the threat of rising sea levels and other climate-related conditions.

"State and local governments are less removed from their constituents, so they're more responsive to voters' concerns," said Profeta, who sits on North Carolina's climate-change commission and has met with British officials on the subject. "Climate change is on people's minds, and they're asking for action."

North Carolina state Sen. Charles W. Albertson (D) said he is not "completely convinced" that human activity is causing global warming, but he pushed for the climate-change commission because he worries that environmental changes are threatening his coastal constituents' homes and livelihoods. "What if it's taking place and we're not doing anything about it?" he asked.

Bush's top environmental adviser, James L. Connaughton, said the president welcomes state and local initiatives because they complement the administration's approach to global warming.

"They're pursuing a portfolio of policies, not a one-size-fits-all policy," Connaughton said in an interview Aug. 4, adding that the United States is also focused on voluntary pacts such as China's pledge to improve its power production efficiency 20 percent by 2010. "At the end of the day, what matters is performance, and we're all making about the same rate of progress."

Some state officials and environmentalists said their efforts will soon surpass anything Bush has done to combat climate change.

Richard Cowart, who has advised officials on both coasts on carbon-trading systems as a director of the Vermont-based Regulatory
Assistance Project, said that together, the two
proposed trading systems "represent one of the largest efforts to rein in carbon emissions in the world."

And Dan Becker, global warming director for the Sierra Club, said auto manufacturers will cut emissions now that states representing a third of the country's market are preparing to regulate carbon dioxide.

"Obviously, what we're trying to do is reach a tipping point," Becker said. "We're probably close to where the car companies will have to cry 'uncle.' "

The automakers are suing to block California's law, however, and the Bush administration may block it on the grounds that it amounts to usurping the federal government's right to set national fuel economy standards.

Margo Thorning, senior vice president of the American Council for Capital Formation, said this array of state regulations could harm the U.S. economy.

"I don't think it's terribly helpful to have the industry wondering what are the car standards in California vis-a-vis the standards in Arizona," said Thorning, whose think tank is funded in part by Exxon Mobil Corp. "It adds a lot of uncertainty and slows the kind of investment we'd like to see in the U.S."

These overlapping carbon dioxide regulations may force the administration's hand. Robert E. Busch, PSEG Services Corp. president, said during a Washington panel discussion in February that "you sort of don't blame" environmentalists for pursuing state caps on carbon dioxide, but added, "The answer to this problem is not 50 different approaches to greenhouse gases in the United States. That makes no sense at all."

And Richard J. Osborne, vice president of public and regulatory policy at Duke Energy Corp., told a Duke University audience in September that his utility backed federal legislation on climate change because the "patchwork of state actions" might produce "state-by-state chaos."

Clinton, who is establishing an international consortium so cities from Cairo to Los Angeles can bargain for energy-efficient products and trade policy ideas, said state and local experiments could eventually form the basis for federal action on climate change.

"What we need to do is get more case studies," Clinton said in an interview last week, adding that while voters care more about global warming now than when he was president, as for candidates, "unfortunately, it's not one of those issues where if you don't do something about it, you'll get beat."

Some federal officials are participating in the emerging carbon-trading economy: Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) has registered his farm's hardwood trees on the Chicago Climate Exchange, calculating that the 3,440 tons of carbon dioxide absorbed by the trees will trade for more than $15,000.

Matt Petersen, president of the advocacy group Global Green USA, said that over the past decade, he has found state and local officials to be more open to imposing energy efficiency standards on commercial buildings and to renewable-energy tax credits. Global Green is advising West Hollywood officials on drafting green building standards for new private construction and is lobbying the Louisiana government to give developers an incentive to rebuild New Orleans in an energy-efficient way.

"We had to do a lot of work and hand-holding early on," Petersen said. "The people who asked the toughest questions are now the biggest advocates."