Why California’s new clean energy law matters for all of us

Across the country, elected officials and business leaders are setting more ambitious goals for renewable energy. California’s recent commitment to 60 percent renewable electricity by 2030 and 100 percent zero-carbon electricity by 2040 is, so far, the gold standard, and Environment California, part of our national network, spearheaded the effort. Here’s Rob Sargent, senior director of our 100% Renewable Energy campaign, on why this new law should inspire every state to aim higher.

How can you tell when an action to fight climate change is the real deal?

You can start by asking three questions: Does it help to get us off of fossil fuels quickly and completely? Does it fuel the development of the clean energy technologies and practices of tomorrow? And does it demonstrate leadership and commitment, inspiring others to follow?

It is rare that any single action checks all three of those boxes. But California’s adoption of Senate Bill 100 is just such an achievement.

An ambitious but necessary goal

Senate Bill 100 commits the state of California to obtaining 60 percent of its electricity from renewable sources, such as wind and solar power, by 2030. And it sets a goal of obtaining 100 percent of the state’s electricity from carbon-free sources by 2045.

In a little more than a generation, the world’s fifth-largest economy will obtain its electricity without the carbon pollution that threatens the future of our planet. That is a big deal.

And it isn’t an exercise in wishful thinking. California has a sterling record of setting seemingly ambitious targets for cleaning up its electricity system—and then beating them. Four times since 2002, California has set renewable energy targets. And all four times, the Golden State has put itself on track to exceed those goals.

Fifteen years ago, for example, California pledged to draw 20 percent of its electricity from renewable sources like wind and solar by 2017. California smashed that goal, getting nearly a third of its electricity from renewable sources last year.

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North Carolina’s coal ash pits are now more than “disasters waiting to happen”

A toxic sludge spill into the Cape Fear River provided a vivid reproach to the Trump administration’s regulation of coal-fired power plants.

In the wake of Florence, floodwaters overwhelmed a Duke Energy coal ash basin near Wilmington and spilled toxic byproduct into the Cape Fear River. In a Sept. 21 news report by Bloomberg, Environment North Carolina Research & Policy Center’s Drew Ball connected the Trump administration’s efforts to relax the Environmental Protection Agency’s rules governing how power plants dispose of their wastes with the toxic coal ash that was washed into North Carolina’s rivers by Hurricane Florence.

“We’ve known these coal ash pits are disasters waiting to happen for a long time,” said Drew to Bloomberg. “And now we have a flood of this magnitude forcing us to recognize the dangers.”

Environment North Carolina supports strict rules governing coal ash disposal, and clean and renewable alternatives to coal-fired electricity.

From Honolulu to Carmel, Indiana, mayors sign on to call for solar

From Indiana to Hawaii, mayors from every state are calling for more solar energy.

More than 200 mayors have signed on to Environment America Research & Policy Center’s Mayors for Solar Energy call to action, released Nov. 13. The bipartisan list of mayors who have signed the letter represents cities that range in size, budget and climate. “Mayors know the existing infrastructure and how to adapt it to best allow solar and other forms of clean, renewable energy to displace the fossil fuels that pollute our communities and make our families sick,” said Go Solar Campaign Associate Emma Searson. “These are neighbors helping neighbors to a brighter future.”

Republican Mayor James Brainard of Carmel, Indiana, for example, supports solar as a way to reduce Carmel’s carbon footprint, even in a part of the country that isn’t known for its sunshine. Other mayors, such as Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, see solar as a way to reach their renewable energy goals.

At Global Climate Summit, ‘Red States Rising’ session shows climate action can shine anywhere

Local leaders are taking action to protect our climate, and not just in so-called “blue states.” At our national network’s second event at September’s Global Climate Action Summit in California, we hosted state, business and local leaders to share stories of climate progress where some might least expect it. The stories shared included St. Petersburg, Florida, and Atlanta, Georgia, committing to 100 percent renewable power and electricity, respectively; North Carolina ranking third in the country for solar energy growth over the last 10 years; and Virginia moving to increase its energy efficiency and renewable resources.

“The reality is that states and localities in all regions recognize the problem and are bringing their communities into a clean energy future,” said Andrea McGimsey, senior director of global warming solutions for Environment America.

Climate change recognizes no partisan boundaries. At least in some Southeastern states and cities, leaders are realizing that neither should our response to it.

Get more updates on our work online at http://environmentnorthcarolina.org.
A boost for clean energy innovation

To hit the goal of 100 percent clean energy, California is going to need to develop and implement the clean energy technologies of tomorrow. The passage of SB 100 will help achieve that.

California’s history of strong clean energy policies has made the Golden State a global center of clean energy innovation. The state currently attracts more than half (57 percent) of all clean energy venture capital investment in the U.S., and generates nearly three times as many patents for clean energy technology as the next leading state. By setting an ambitious goal for clean electricity, SB 100 represents an all-points bulletin to clean energy innovators and entrepreneurs, making it far more likely that the clean energy technologies of tomorrow will be developed and tested in California.

A powerful example

By committing to 100 percent clean electricity, California is pushing all of its chips to the center of the table in a big bet on clean energy. Visionaries, experts and political leaders have talked for years about what a zero-carbon electricity system might look like and whether it is even possible. California’s message to them is as follows: “Watch us. Let us show you how it’s done.”

California’s ambition and confidence will surely make an impression on leaders in the many states already taking action on climate—and even some that aren’t yet. California’s bold action will shift the conversation as to what is technologically, economically and politically possible.

It will also change the global conversation. California’s action sends a message to Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Xi Jinping and other world leaders that America’s progress toward clean energy will continue—Donald Trump or no Donald Trump. If the federal government won’t lead, states will.

At a time when much of the news about climate change is bad, California’s bold, new clean energy commitment is a breath of fresh air. And it could be a critical turning point in the fight against global warming.

By Rob Sargent, senior director, Campaign for 100% Renewable Energy

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Thank you for making all this work possible with your action and support.

Drew Ball
State Director
Hundreds of thousands join the call to choose wildlife over waste

More than 300,000 of our members and supporters across the country have joined our call to cut down on single-use plastics.

“We’ve all seen the stories of dead whales with gobs of plastic in their guts, or the photo of a turtle with a straw jammed in its nose,” said Steve Blackledge, senior director of our national network’s conservation program. “Compassion and common sense tells us that we need to move away from our throwaway, use-it-once-and-then-it’s-garbage way of thinking, as soon as possible.”

As a new year begins, we’re working to keep that momentum going here in North Carolina.

“Our national network held cleanup events on rivers and beaches across the country to bring attention to problem of plastic waste.”