

New climate plan calls for carbon neutrality by 2050

BY JOHNATHAN HETTINGER, Montana Free Press | September 15, 2020

A report commissioned by Gov. Steve Bullock to help Montana provide a framework to combat and adapt to a warming climate was released Wednesday.

Called the [Montana Climate Solutions Plan](#), the report outlines strategies to help reach Bullock's stated goal of bringing net greenhouse gas emissions to zero in the electricity sector by 2035. The report also recommends the state reach net-zero emissions across the economy by 2050.

"I'm very excited about this plan and the way it was put together," said Cathy Whitlock, a member of the council and one of the authors of the 2017 Montana Climate Assessment.

"Climate change is really the biggest issue we're facing. It's a health crisis and an environmental crisis. It impacts people's livelihoods and people's health."

Montana has already warmed by about 3 degrees Fahrenheit since 1950, Bullock said.

According to the 2017 Montana Climate Assessment, a warmer climate is expected to lead to an increasing number and increasing severity of wildfires and less snowpack in Montana in the coming decades. The effects of the changes will be wide-ranging, from fish kills in the Yellowstone River to negatively impacting human health through wildfire smoke.

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Bullock, whose term ends in January, appointed the 44-member Climate Solutions Council in July 2019. The council advanced more than 50 recommendations for the state to consider, 40 of which were unanimous. The panel focused on three areas: how to prepare communities for the impacts of a changing climate; how to reduce emissions; how to work on regional economic development to shift Montana's economy to be more sustainable.

Amy Cilimburg, executive director of Climate Smart Missoula and a council member, praised the "very comprehensive plan" for finding a variety of solutions. Cilimburg said whether the plan is effective depends on state leadership, policies and funding for these efforts. "People should dig in. There's no easy solutions. There's not one silver bullet that's going to get us on track," she

said. “It’s pretty clear that Montana’s economy is vested on us making big transitions. This plan offers a lot of plans on how to do that and strengthen our economy.”

Montana has the largest recoverable coal reserves in the country, and implementing this plan would likely mean leaving many of those in the ground. Part of the future means Montana’s economy is “transitioning away from natural resource extraction sectors and toward services,” the report said. The Chamber of Commerce, the Montana Petroleum Association, NorthWestern Energy and the Montana Electric Cooperatives Association opposed most of the major goals, including achieving greenhouse gas neutrality in electricity by 2035 and economy-wide by 2050, establishing low-emission vehicle standards and increasing the allowable size for distributed electricity generation systems. The Chamber of Commerce and Northwestern Energy did not respond to requests for comment by Montana Free Press.

Bullock said he was glad to see so much agreement on most of the goals, and that he hopes Montana can get to work immediately on the areas where people agree.

Conservative media website The Daily Caller published a leaked draft of the report, saying it called for a carbon tax. However, the final report does not call for a carbon tax, saying instead that Montana should participate in national conversations around carbon pricing, a method of using market mechanisms to tax emitting carbon. Bullock, who is running in a nationally relevant race for Senate against Sen. Steve Daines, said he doesn’t support any national carbon pricing plan but does support being a part of the conversations.

“You can either be on the bus or under it,” Bullock said. Mark Haggerty, research director at Headwaters

Economics and member of the council, said the plan is designed to be bipartisan and be able to be implemented by Montana’s next governor, whoever it may be. Haggerty praised the plan as really ambitious and consistent with what national assessments say needs to be done to help avoid the worst circumstances that could be caused by climate change. “This is intended to be implementable by whoever the next governor is,” Haggerty said. “We weren’t focusing on only one pathway to achieve the goals.”

One aspect of the plan designed to help Montana’s workforce adapt to climate change is a series of “regional innovation clusters.” Those proposed clusters would bring together higher learning institutions with industry across the state to lead to a more educated and skilled workforce. These clusters would focus on everything from agriculture to timber to biofuels. Haggerty said these clusters could help Montana’s economy come out stronger than it is now.

“It’s a big deal, but it’s doable, very doable,” Haggerty said.

Haggerty said community and state planning will be a huge part of the transition, but the plan presents a reasonable outline for those plans.

“This is going to be a start of the policy discussion, not the last word,” Bullock said.

Caitlin Piserchia, a Missoula-based organizer with the Sierra Club who was a member of the council, also voted against the clean energy standard requiring 100 percent clean energy by 2050 because she thought it wasn’t aggressive enough. Piserchia said the 2018 International Panel on Climate Change Report said global emissions need to be declining well before 2030. “This is a really critical decade, what we do in the next few years is really key, so I would like to see a faster timeline,” she said. Overall, Piserchia said the plan is solid but imperfect. She said Montana cities like Helena, Bozeman and Missoula have already committed to more ambitious timelines for clean energy, and the state should also do so.

Piserchia also was one of four members to vote against the state working to advance carbon capture and storage efforts because the technology is costly and unproven.

Melissa Hornbein, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center who focuses on climate issues and not affiliated with the council, said she thinks the proposal is a good first step, but it’s not enough to do Montana’s part in limiting global warming to two degrees celsius. Hornbein said more focus should be on more quickly reducing emissions, rather than looking at mitigation measures like carbon capture.

“We are fast approaching a point of no return where this planet is going to be less livable for our children and our children’s children,” Hornbein said.

Whitlock said the ideas set forth by the plan are worthwhile, but whether those goals are met will depend on future leadership.

“I think there are a lot of details to be worked out,” she said.