Natural Systems Are a Key Element of Climate Policy

The “Natural Systems and Climate Change: Strategies for Our Future” Symposium on May 20, 2013 in Sacramento, brought together a diverse audience, exceptional speakers and panelists, and covered a lot of territory. We talked about everything from the American Pika, to grass-fed beef, to high speed rail and connected them all back to climate change and natural systems. We heard a lot of acronyms: DRECP, BDCP, AB32, SB375, EGPR. These are the letters and numbers that are shorthand for the cutting edge policy that California is known for. Through this symposium we sought to improve understanding and build support for including natural systems as a critical part of our state’s climate strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

The day started with three presentations designed to establish the policy, conservation and scientific foundations for the day’s discussion. Ken Alex, Senior Policy Advisor to Governor Jerry Brown and the Director of the Office of Planning and Research, did a superb job of framing how important and timely this topic is due to the numerous and growing human impacts from climate change and population growth. He shared some examples of planning efforts that reflect the importance of conservation, such as the State’s Environmental Goals and Policy Report. He did not shy away from controversial topics and made the case that high speed rail is an opportunity to help the Central Valley develop in a new transit-oriented way that helps preserve farmland and open space in the long-term compared to alternatives. Importantly, he left us with a sense of optimism with the example of new sources of renewable energy, like solar arrays, that produce power while still providing habitat for protected species.

We heard from Chuck Bonham, Director, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, who reminded us of the Department of Fish and Wildlife's awesome mission of stewardship and the tremendous wealth of resources we have here in California. He stated that there is no greater threat to biodiversity than climate change. He was the first of the day, though not the last, to say that adaptation is expensive, but doing nothing is much more expensive. He expressed that we have a tremendous opportunity to use green infrastructure such as wetland restoration as a nature-based solution to build resilience to climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions simultaneously. He left us with the adage from David Orr that hope is an imperative.

We heard repeatedly throughout the day the strong need for science that is relevant and framed in a useful form. Professor Mark Schwartz from the John Muir Institute for the Environment at UC Davis laid the groundwork for this when he discussed the importance of boundary organizations like the UC Davis Policy Institute that operate in the boundary space between science and policy because our old model of merely funding science and hoping it will be useful is no longer sufficient. It was great hearing from an
ecologist who sounded quite a bit like an economist in his description of efficiency frontiers and reminded us we need to ask different questions. This type of thinking can help us find ways to efficiently and effectively promote low carbon development while protecting the environment, much like the solar panel and endangered species example provided by Ken Alex earlier in the day.

Our first panel, led by Ashley Conrad-Saydah, Assistant Secretary for Climate Policy, California Environmental Protection Agency, provided some tangible examples that focused our thinking with a variety of case studies and actions already underway by landowners, local governments, and businesses that reduce GHG emissions through the protection of natural resources. Panelists Karen Gaffney, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District; Kristal Davis Fadtke, Delta Conservancy; Terry Collins, Collins Pine Company; Joe Morris, Morris Grassfed Beef; and Misha Sarkovich, Sacramento Municipal Utility District, gave some inspiring examples of conservation being put into practice in Sonoma County, the Delta, Sacramento, Amador County, and the Central Coast. It was noted that protection of natural capital is the gift that keeps on giving because while the value of human infrastructure depreciates, natural infrastructure appreciates.

At lunch, we received a federal perspective from the US Department of Interior. David Hayes, Deputy Secretary, Department of the Interior, from his armchair in D.C., emphasized that large landscapes are particularly important when we are talking about climate change, large solar, large oil and gas projects, and offshore wind. He also suggested everyone start following the Department of the Interior’s Instagram for a daily dose of American wilderness. David Nawi, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for California and Nevada, Department of Interior, strongly reiterated the need for and value of credible, useful, and readily accessible science as well as highlighted the numerous existing science-based strategies that are now available to help us effectively and efficiently tackle the new challenges presented by climate change.

In the afternoon, Bill Craven, Chief Consultant, Senate Natural Resources, led an expert panel who discussed some of the policies and programs in place, as well as opportunities and obstacles we face. Again we heard about the DRECP and the EGPR and other large planning efforts underway in which natural systems and climate change are core elements. Ann Chan, Deputy Secretary for Climate Change and Energy, Natural Resources Agency made a strong argument for more research that is relevant and targeted. Louise Bedsworth, Senior Researcher, Office of Planning and Research reminded us that we need to consider these issues in all of our investments as well as the importance of evaluating tradeoffs. Mike McCoy, Executive Director, Strategic Growth Council, focused in on the inextricable link between natural systems and urban planning. Josh Stark, State Policy Director, TransForm highlighted the importance of integrated land use strategies that address transportation and conservation to reduce vehicle miles traveled and other GHG emissions. Michelle Passero, Senior Climate Policy Advisor, The Nature Conservancy, emphasized the potentially huge opportunity to catalyze nature as a climate
solution through the use of auction proceeds from the state’s cap and trade program and update to the AB 32 Scoping Plan.

The final panel was led by Greg Dalton, Climate One, who expertly elicited the political context for climate change in California from some of California’s policy thought leaders. Assembly Member Mark Stone said Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties talk a lot about climate change, but adaptation is a tough conversation right now. State Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson emphasized that we are pushing against some strong economic pressures. State Senator Ted Lieu said that when speaking with constituents, he frames climate change as the biggest natural security threat that we face. The members felt there is a lot we can do with the auction proceeds now and want to help get money into the hands of local decision makers to address these issues. The members emphasized that local leadership is essential for making tough decisions about what our communities should look like as climate change impacts roll in.

Finally, we heard from Nancy McFadden, Executive Secretary for Legislation, Appointments and Policy for Governor Brown. She provided helpful political insight on the Governor’s priorities to address climate change, reinforcing messages delivered by Ken Alex earlier in the day, including some inspiring words from Governor Brown’s commencement address at UC Berkeley. She also highlighted some of the considerations and circumstances surrounding the proposal to borrow auction proceeds as part of the Governor’s budget.

One of the speakers mentioned that climate change gives us a sense of a very slow moving emergency. We need to shift this perception because really it’s these extreme events like wildfires, floods, and coastal storm surges that are acute and catastrophic and have long-term implications. So, we have a grand challenge before us, one that we believe, we as Californians, are exceedingly well-equipped to take on. The Nature Conservancy and the UC Davis Policy Institute are committed to helping inform this effort with the best available science so that the conversation can appropriately focus on the important policy questions rather than scientific uncertainty. Stay involved and join the conversation here.