

# Keeping grounded on climate change

By **Kerry Miller**, ANJEC Assistant Director

**T**he recession and government budget crises seem to be creating a political climate of rashness in which anything and everything is a target. Recently, more politicians have been willing to voice (or imply) a position that climate change is not human-caused, and that regulatory programs to combat it are a sham. Recent legislation threatening the 10-state Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), and Congressional proposals to prohibit the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from regulating greenhouse gases (GHG) are disconcerting, to say the least. Is there a sea change looming in the public's support for climate mitigation programs?

Because climate change prediction is a highly technical science that is beyond the expertise of most ordinary people, it is an easy target for attack through sound bites and arguments based on simple belief structures. It takes decades to amass a pool of scientific information to prove human-caused climate change, but it only takes a minute to plant the seeds of doubt.

In addition, an aversion to 'big government' initiatives can also feed a skeptic's inclination not to support climate mitigation, which will require long-term government intervention. The science and environmental communities are under continuing pressure to provide more comprehensible information about the mounting scientific evidence for human-generated climate change, and the options for mitigation.

## The experts speak

In December, the nonprofit Environment New Jersey organized a panel of Rutgers University scientists at the Statehouse Annex in Trenton to discuss and respond to comments by the Governor casting doubt on his commitment to New Jersey's climate mitigation initiatives. The speakers – Dr. Alan

Robock, Dr. James Miller and Dr. Paul Falkowski – are credentialed experts in the fields of climate studies, biological oceanography, and climate change modeling.

The scientists spoke about decades of research, data collection and modeling (theirs and others') that with each passing year provide additional evidence that human production of greenhouse gases is contributing to unusually rapid warming and a host of related changes. Climate models are not perfect, but they are, in the judgment of most of the scientific community, strong enough to act on. The Rutgers scientists also concurred that many typical arguments against human-caused warming, from solar influence to volcanoes, simply are not borne out by current knowledge or climate models.

Many government agencies, including the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and EPA, have significant programs related to climate change. The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority recently commissioned a greenhouse gas inventory for its entire 13-county region. It will use the study to incorporate strategies for reducing GHG into long-range plans that affect municipalities from High Point to Tuckerton. The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission has a similar initiative in South Jersey. By providing exposure and collaboration for these plans locally, and highlighting their GHG-reducing nature in context with other benefits, commissions, towns and counties can help to reinforce climate terminology and mitigation strategies as institutional norms.

## Local action on climate change

ANJEC is particularly concerned with how municipalities can combat climate change through planning and policies at the local level. What successes and what

frustrations are environmental commissions encountering, and how can they keep the climate issue on the table?

One encouraging indicator could be the number of towns participating in the Sustainable Jersey (SJ) certification program and completing tasks in the "Greenhouse Gas" category. The SJ web site lists 28 towns calculating their municipal carbon footprint over the past three years, and 60 towns calculating a community carbon footprint. At least 35 municipalities are developing or have completed a climate action plan. That's a lot of activity in a short period of time in support of climate mitigation.

ANJEC recently heard from a commissioner in a town that just completed its master plan reexamination. Some concerned residents had written individually to the planning board, requesting the addition of language considering climate change in land use plans – for vegetation and tree selection and in building placement and construction. The planning board acknowledged their requests, but declined to add the new provisions. Does this mean the board doubts climate change, or just that it is uncomfortable leading on the issue? In fact, this may be an opportunity for the environmental commission to step up to the plate by researching and writing a master plan sustainability element that has community support, and presenting it to the board to consider.


A number of NJ towns have adopted green building and sustainability master plan elements that include renewable energy and energy conservation strategies. The desire to reduce GHGs is a primary rationale for these elements, in addition to goals such as economic and environmental sustainability, and reducing dependence on imported oil. Environmental commissions may help to keep climate mitigation from becoming a local political football or a budget casualty by working to keep sustainability plans front and center through public outreach, monitoring and tracking results, and continuing to stress the multiple benefits

of climate mitigation efforts. For example, conserving energy and converting to renewable energy sources are critical goals in their own right; reducing emissions is an additional benefit.

## Preparing for long range impacts

Another element of the climate change discussion is how to prepare for its impacts, including sea level rise and more extreme weather. Although coastal and other flood-prone communities are understandably unwilling to rezone now for long-range projected maximums, there is support for protecting coastal areas that are already subject to flooding, through inclusion in open space plans and buyout programs. Again, pairing environmental goals with saving money gets better political traction.

Over time, commissions can help taxpayers understand that it is cheaper in the long run to preserve land that is subject to flooding than to endlessly build, bail, evacuate, and rebuild. As the frequency of storms and flooding increases, municipal governments can seize the moment when residents and businesses are feeling the stress of repeated losses to propose land use changes that restrict building in the path of rising waters.

Climate change, although proceeding rapidly in geologic terms, is still a long-term phenomenon as perceived by most people. Rather than becoming discouraged by a lack of political or public responsiveness, commissions need to take the long view, keep prodding, learning and informing, and proposing win-win solutions that pair climate change mitigation with other values and benefits. 

### RESOURCES

- NJDEP Office of Climate & Energy: [www.nj.gov/dep/oc](http://www.nj.gov/dep/oc)
- USEPA: [www.epa.gov/climatechange](http://www.epa.gov/climatechange)
- Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative: [www.rggi.org/home](http://www.rggi.org/home)
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: [www.ipcc.ch/](http://www.ipcc.ch/)
- Arguments Against Climate Change: [www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php](http://www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php)