

WASHINGTON GOVERNOR ISSUES “CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGE” EXECUTIVE ORDER TO ADDRESS WATER RESOURCES -- DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY GEARS UP

By Sarah E. Mack
mack@tmw-law.com

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In February 2007, Governor Christine Gregoire issued Executive Order 07-02, launching a “Washington Climate Change Challenge” initiative to achieve ambitious goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, developing clean energy, and preparing for the impact of global warming. Among other things, the executive order directs the Washington Department of Ecology and other agencies to evaluate and prepare for the impact of global warming on water supply and management. In response, the Department of Ecology has begun to organize a climate change committee on water resources.

Background

Washington is especially vulnerable to climate change because of its dependence on mountain snowpack for summer stream flows and because of the threat to coastal communities posed by the expected rise in sea levels. Extreme weather patterns, a warming Pacific Northwest, reduced snowpack, and sea level rise – each associated with climate change – will disrupt Washington’s natural environment, population, and economy. For example, a 2006 report commissioned by the Department of Ecology and the Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development estimated that the costs of water conservation to offset anticipated impacts on water supplies for the city of Seattle and other large municipal water suppliers could exceed \$16 million per year by the 2040s.

Because of Washington’s extensive hydropower resources, power generation is not as significant a source of greenhouse gas emissions as in other states. According to the

Department of Ecology, more than 45 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in Washington are associated with transportation.

Executive Order 07-02

In her executive order, Governor Gregoire observed that the causes of climate change are global, but the effects of climate change on Washington are “local and unique, including our dependence on snowpack for fresh water, our reliance on hydropower for energy, and our significant amount of shoreline.” Citing research by the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington, the executive order states that “the effects of climate change are already being felt in the state of Washington in the form of average yearly temperatures rising faster over the 20th Century than the global average, mountain glaciers in the North Cascades losing up to a third of their area since 1950, snowpack in the Cascades declining by 35%, peak spring river runoff occurring 10 to 30 days earlier and the proportion of stream flow that arrives in summer decreasing as much as 34% in sensitive river basins.”

The executive order notes that Washington has already taken significant actions to address climate change, including adoption of the Columbia River Management Act to “work toward meeting the water storage needs for agriculture, communities, and salmon.” According to the executive order, Washington’s vast hydroelectric system must be taken into account in any regional or national program to combat global warming, and the state “must continue its work to be prepared for the inevitable impacts of climate change.”

Governor Gregoire declared the state’s commitment to address climate change by establishing aggressive goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, including reducing emissions to 50% below 1990 levels by the year 2050, and for increasing “clean energy sector jobs” and reducing expenditures on imported fuels. The executive order also includes the implementation of “significant policy actions taken in 2005 and 2006 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These actions will move Washington State to at least 60% of the 2020 goal [of reductions in greenhouse gas emissions] and grow the clean energy economy” by, among other things, “pursuing new water resources in Eastern Washington, including water conservation projects, developing new storage and new creative water management alternatives.” This reference appears to be to the Columbia River Management Act enacted by the Washington State Legislature in 2006.

To implement these goals and to plan for the future, Governor Gregoire announced the “Washington Climate Change Challenge,” a broad-based climate change initiative to be developed within one year by the Department of Ecology and the Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development. Among other things, the Climate Change Challenge is supposed to “assess what further steps the state of Washington should take to be prepared for the impact of global warming to water supply and management.”

Conclusion and Implications

In response, Ecology has announced the formation of a committee on climate change and water resources, with the goal of shaping informed policy and planning decisions. The first question that has arisen is how many “stakeholders” will participate in this committee. Noting the need for “an appropriately sized stakeholder table,” Ecology’s website invites interested persons to volunteer for this committee in the hope that “the table will be large enough to allow for the varied interests of stakeholders to be heard and debated, but not so large as to stall or prevent progress toward group consensus.” Although the committee membership has not yet been announced, it is anticipated that the water resources committee will be comprised of approximately twelve “stakeholders” in addition to agency staff. Meetings of the committee will be open to the public.

It is difficult to predict whether this climate change water resources committee will focus the bulk of its efforts on identifying impacts to water resources or on managing water resources in the face of climate change. It can be inferred from the Governor’s Executive Order that new ideas for resource management may be welcomed, but it remains to be seen whether Ecology’s “stakeholder” consensus process will result in new, creative policy approaches that could respond effectively to climate change. A copy of the executive order can be found at http://www.governor.wa.gov/execorders/eo_07-02.pdf.