

Turning up the heat

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Late last month, Florida's Republican Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed an energy bill that called for monitoring greenhouse gas emissions and provided funding for alternative energy research.

Crist felt the bill didn't go far enough. "We can do better," he said. "We must do better."

Congress and the Bush administration have been no-shows, so far, in the critical fight against global climate change. They could learn a few things about leadership from state and local leaders - including a growing number of Republicans - who are wading into the fray.

Crist, who signed a sweeping package of initiatives to fight global warming this month, is the latest member of a club that also includes California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, and New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who only recently switched his affiliation from Republican to Independent.

Among Democrats, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich has embraced plans to build power plants in his state that rely on a new technology called coal gasification. It allows for the capture of carbon dioxide and reduces emissions of smog-forming pollutants. New Jersey's Gov. Jon Corzine also is among those who have taken action to limit the release of gases that cause global warming.

Schwarzenegger was on hand Friday as Crist of Florida signed several executive orders at the close of a global warming summit in Miami.

One of them requires power companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2017, to 1990 levels by 2025 and by 80 percent at mid-century. Another requires most state departments to achieve a 10 percent emissions reduction by 2012, a 25 percent reduction by 2017 and a 40 percent cut by 2025. A third order encourages state regulators to require Florida power companies to generate 20 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2020; it's only 2 percent today. That mirrors a provision environmentalists tried unsuccessfully to insert in an energy bill approved last month by the U.S. Senate.

Crist also wants new cars sold in Florida to meet stringent carbon dioxide emission standards first proposed by California in 2005. But there's a catch. California needs approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency before it can tighten its emission requirements. Generally, states aren't allowed to do that. (California is "grandfathered" in because it had clean air laws before the federal government.)

Florida can't set its own standards, but it could adopt California's - if the Bush administration signs off on California's plans. So far, it has resisted, arguing that allowing California to enact its own standards would result in a patchwork of rules that automakers would be unable to meet.

It's a flimsy argument. California's stricter standards for other pollutants have not caused an automaker meltdown. If it's allowed to tighten rules on greenhouse gas emissions and other states follow suit, there still will be only two sets of emission standards.

Of course, if Congress and the president believe that's unfair, all they have to do is bring federal standards in line with those of California.

In the absence of federal leadership, it's crucial for states to implement global warming plans of their own. Illinois and Missouri should join with others that have pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The longer we wait, the more difficult and expensive the job will be.

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