

Hick moves Colorado backward on climate change

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In April of 2008, Governor Bill Ritter issued an Executive Order establishing Colorado's first greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction goals to help head off disruptions to our society resulting from climate change. Those goals were to reduce GHG emissions 20% by 2020 and 80% by 2050, both compared to 2005 levels. The Executive Order also required the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) to report periodically on the State's GHG emissions inventory. The directive was to remain in force until modified or rescinded by a future Executive Order.

The first CDPHE report on GHG emissions was released in October 2014. It did not mention the goals established by Governor Ritter. Nearly a year later, Governor John Hickenlooper released the 2015 Colorado Climate Plan. That document also failed to mention the specific goals established by Governor Ritter, and established no new goals. Rather than modifying or rescinding the 2008 Executive Order establishing GHG emissions reduction goals for Colorado, Governor Hickenlooper appeared to be trying simply to sweep them under the rug.

Finally, on August 24th of this year, a draft Executive Order by Governor Hickenlooper establishing two new GHG emissions reduction goals was leaked to the press. Those goals are to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from the power sector 25% by 2025 and 35% by 2035, both compared to 2012 levels. Despite seeming significant – 25% and 35% sound like big cuts, after all – these goals are substantially less ambitious than the goals set forth by Governor Ritter in 2008.

Why is this? First, the power sector, which includes both the generation and transmission of electricity, only represents 30% of Colorado's total GHG emissions. Second, statewide emissions increased between 2005 and 2012, meaning that the new goals are calculated using a higher baseline. And third, the new goals don't consider methane emissions associated with the natural gas used to generate electricity.

Even if CO₂ were the only greenhouse gas, Governor Hickenlooper's proposed new goals would translate to only 8% statewide GHG emissions reductions by 2025 and 11% statewide GHG emissions reductions by 2035 compared to 2005 – both substantially less than the 2020 goal established by Governor Ritter. And because of the methane emissions from drilling, producing, and distributing the fracked gas that will help reduce CO₂ emissions from the power sector, Governor Hickenlooper's goals could actually result in a net increase in statewide GHG emissions, rather than a decrease.

Governor Ritter's old GHG emissions reduction goals are roughly what would be needed at the global level – including both industrialized and “developing” countries – to limit the global average temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit). However, limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) would pose a much lower risk to Earth's climate, and the agreement reached in Paris last December recognized this second figure as the maximum desirable increase in global temperature.

Furthermore, we need to acknowledge that the United States and other industrialized countries have been emitting significant amounts of GHGs into the atmosphere for a very long time compared to developing countries. Stated differently, the U.S. and other industrialized countries have caused most of the problem and should therefore lead more aggressively towards the solution. These two considerations – the need to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees C, and the need to take responsibility for our historically high emissions – imply that even the goals established by the Ritter Administration are inadequate. Based on the best available science, Colorado should aim to reduce its net GHG emissions to zero – or very close to that mark – by 2030 at the latest.

Given this context, the new goals proposed in Governor Hickenlooper's draft Executive Order are not simply inadequate, they move Colorado, the U.S. and the world backward. We need goals capable of truly addressing the climate crisis, and we need to start making real progress toward those goals as soon as possible.

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