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Big Cities, Major Producers and Victims of Greenhouse Gases, Feel Ignored

By EVAN LEHMANN of [ClimateWire](#)

Big cities feel "invisible" in the climate debate in Congress, even though they face some of the biggest threats from human-sharpened natural hazards.

Washington's omission is troubling to metropolitan areas like New York City and Chicago because they are the dominant source of carbon dioxide in their regions and will face the earliest impacts. They are also racing to understand climate change, while confronting its causes and trying to adapt to its downsides.

Yet Congress is looking to state capitals -- often located in smaller cities -- for decisions that focus on major urban centers with mounting populations, several city officials say.

That means the House-passed climate bill introduced by Reps. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and Edward Markey (D-Mass.) overlooks city experts with experience in adjusting real-life practices, like building and zoning codes, to match shifting climatic problems, they say. Those decisions could require new bridges to be built longer to account for more flooding, for example, or that homes be placed farther away from the sea's rising reach.

"One of the biggest disappointments we have with Waxman-Markey is that cities are absolutely invisible in the bill," Adam Freed, deputy director of New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, said last week.

"We control local building codes, local zoning codes, local energy codes [and] emergency management -- very important adaptation tools," he added. "Yet all the responsibility for adaptation planning is on the state."

Climate battle will be waged in cities

The complaint reflects a growing effort among cities to have a louder voice in the climate debate as the Senate prepares to unveil its version of the bill in September. At root, cities that are already grappling with climate problems -- and seeking solutions -- say the states should be removed as middlemen.

Under the bill, states are charged with developing adaptation plans. They have to pay for the planning before they're eligible to receive federal funding to implement them. Earlier versions of Waxman-Markey funded both planning and grants.

And it's not just adaptation. Similar omissions hamper cities' abilities to reduce emissions, said Joyce Coffee, director of policy and research at Chicago's Department of the Environment.

"The climate bill is silent on cities," she said, adding that Chicago supports the bill but wants to be more active.

"We are the ones that do the retrofits of dwelling units, we do the retrofits of industrial and commercial buildings. We run the public transit systems," Coffee added. "These are the things that are going to decrease demand for coal-fired power, for instance, which is at the heart of what the climate bill should be about."

On the map, cities are a pinprick. They account for about 1 percent of the Earth's surface. But from the eye of an emission specialist, they're a bellowing tuba in a whispering orchestra of flutes. Cities together produce about 75 percent of the world's carbon and are home to half the planet's people, according to the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, which is composed of the largest cities in the world.

"The battle to prevent catastrophic climate change will be won or lost in our cities," the group argues.

Cities: Give us the money

Waxman-Markey is designed to prompt new strategies for coping with inevitable changes to the climate. The states together would receive about \$1 billion a year between 2012 and 2022 for adaptation. That amount would then double until 2026, at which point it would double again -- providing about \$4 billion a year to the states.

But is it enough to finance the many burdens of adaptation?

"It's not going to serve all of the adaptation needs, but it's a start," said Josh Foster, who manages the adaptation program at the Center for Clean Air Policy.

Cities want the money directly. Giving it to the states could mean that Congress' attempt at a carbon palliative is diluted among scattered political interests, whether an area faces new risk or not, these officials say. Adaptation funding is to be disbursed based on a per capita formula. Critics say that's wrong. Instead, it should be siphoned to those areas that face the most risk -- beginning with coastal cities.

Many cities are already reducing emissions. Seattle has a goal of lowering carbon output 7 percent by 2012. Salt Lake City is seeking a 70 percent reduction by 2040, Philadelphia wants to cut carbon by 10 percent next year, and Los Angeles plans to ax 35 percent of its energy pollution by 2030.

As temperatures rise, so do deaths

Those plans are designed to save lives and city infrastructure. Longer and hotter heat waves are a main concern, especially with elderly people poised to make up a much larger percentage of the population in coming decades.

"Heat is already the leading cause of weather-related deaths in the United States," according to the Obama administration's first climate report, released last month.

About 3,400 Americans died from heat between 1999 and 2003. That number is expected to skyrocket by midcentury. In Chicago, deaths are predicted to more than double to about 400 people a year by 2055 under a low-emission scenario, the report says. Almost 800 people could die each year if carbon goes unchecked.

To limit the damage, Chicago is working to reduce its citywide emissions 80 percent by 2050. Death by heat can also be curbed by changing the city's color. If rooftops are painted light shades, or covered with trees, the sprawling metropolis would absorb less heat.

But Chicago and other cities say they need help cutting carbon. They want the federal government to stop giving money for things like transportation to the states, which focus on building highways. Instead,

those checks should be deposited directly into the vaults of cities, which could use it for public transportation like subways.

"We have a major role to play in mitigating greenhouse gas emissions," Coffee of Chicago said. "We are the locus of population -- and to be frank, the locus of greenhouse gas emissions."

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