

Upgrade Maryland's climate action plan | COMMENTARY

By **BALTIMORE SUN EDITORIAL BOARD**

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Polls show most Maryland residents recognize that climate change is a man-made disaster in the making. Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, has certainly acknowledged that. And so have the Democrats running the General Assembly. Yet there's clearly been some backsliding in the effort to reverse it. A decade ago, Maryland was viewed as a leader in the nation's war on climate change. Today, it's more like a decent, well-meaning, middle-of-the-pack ally.

Now that the election of Joe Biden as president and the United States has formally returned the country to the Paris climate agreement, the time is ripe for the state to set a more ambitious target. At some level, Governor Hogan and Democrats in Annapolis would seem in agreement. The Hogan administration wants to see greenhouse gas emissions reduced by 50% by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2045. Legislation pending before the General Assembly, the Climate Solutions Now Act of 2021, seeks that same net zero target.

The difference is that the version moving through the state Senate is significantly more ambitious in the short term, with a goal of reducing emissions by 60% from 2006 levels and planting 5 million trees by 2030. And it anticipates a greater policy input from low-income and minority communities, groups often more negatively impacted by air pollution.

If all this seems quite reasonable, there's a reason for that — it is. Yet, environmentalists fear that some in the State House do not quite grasp the urgency. As Sen. Paul Pinsky, the lead sponsor of the Senate bill, has pointed out, the Hogan administration's talk about climate tends to surpass its actions. Note for example, that the governor's climate bill, [House Bill 1362](#), was submitted several weeks past the legislative deadline (and yet little changed from a bill the administration offered one year ago).

More broadly, it's not hard to see the issue being lost in the more pressing concerns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet climate change poses the bigger long-term danger to the health and well-being of the state. Rising sea level alone represents an existential threat for many living in low-lying areas, with Chesapeake Bay waters projected to be two feet higher by 2050. Even now, places

like Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore are more frequently getting flooded, their farm fields ruined by the intrusion of brackish water. By the end of the 21st century, experts fear the bay could be a 3.7 feet higher, which means a lot of coastal towns could be wiped out in a storm well before that moment. There's just so much sea walls can hold back.

Lawmakers need to take this seriously. Those who claim Maryland risks job losses if tougher emissions standards are pursued have it exactly wrong. The far greater danger is in doing nothing. How many jobs are lost when whole communities are flooded? When drinking water supplies are lost? When farms are ruined? When weather becomes more extreme? When human health suffers as ground-level ozone increases? Maryland, a coastal state, is at greater risk than much of the country. It ought to be a leader in finding solutions.

Providing career opportunities for displaced fossil fuel industry workers is a worthy goal. It ought to be part of the plan. So should ending policies that give tax credits to companies that burn trash to create power. But the single most important element in Maryland's response is to reduce emissions and increase offsets, like with trees that absorb carbon dioxide. Mr. Hogan has sought a 50% reduction by 2030. That's just not good enough. Not when Maryland is so vulnerable. And certainly not when Mr. Hogan's own Department of the Environment recognizes that the move away from greenhouse gas emissions would be a net jobs creator.

We would urge the Maryland Senate to give final approval to [Senate Bill 414](#) and for the House of Delegates to follow suit with House Bill 583. The state is certainly capable of meeting these targets. Last Tuesday, the state's largest school system committed to becoming the nation's largest operator of electric school buses, a climate-friendly choice that already significantly boosts Maryland toward its emissions goal. A Maryland League of Conservation Voters poll found that at least two-thirds of voters statewide favor such measures as requiring new homes to be emissions free, requiring utilities to use renewable energy only and billing fossil fuel companies a carbon tax. And those are among the most controversial policies. Simply moving faster toward tougher emissions standards should be an easy call. And it should be approved right now.

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