

Md. set to aim high on climate

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FULL TEXT

AMBITIOUS GOALS
TO FIGHT WARMING

Legislators approve plan, but a veto threat looms

Maryland lawmakers passed an omnibus climate change bill on Thursday designed to give the state some of the most aggressive environmental goals in the country - if the bill survives a veto threat from Republican Gov. Larry Hogan.

The sprawling legislation accelerates Maryland's already ambitious environmental goals, seeking to cut emissions by 60 percent of 2006 levels by 2031, up from the current goal of 40 percent. It also spells out sweeping changes to get there.

"We are planting a flag. We are being a leader. We expect to be copied," said House Environment and Transportation Chairman Kumar P. Barve (D-Montgomery), one of the chief architects of the plan that some proponents wished went even further to wean the state off fossil fuels.

If the legislation stands, owners of large commercial and apartment buildings would be required to cut their carbon emissions or face fines. The state's fleet and public school buses would transition to electric vehicles. Tax breaks would be handed out for community solar projects, along with loans to finance large-scale green energy projects. The state would pay millions to organizations working in communities with neglected environments on projects such as planting trees, mitigating air pollution or insulating low-income housing. And the legislation would take new steps to set the state on a course to be carbon neutral by 2045.

It also starts taking steps to eventually bar the use of natural gas to heat new buildings. The Environmental Protection Agency has said fossil fuels heating homes and businesses account for about 13 percent of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. The idea is to rely on carbon-free sources of electricity instead, and it requires the state to document that the electrical grid could absorb that demand by 2023. A proposal to immediately implement a natural gas ban for new construction was stripped out of the bill after objections from energy and construction lobbyists, lawmakers said.

Maryland's Department of the Environment considers the state, with its 3,100 miles of coastline and environmentally sensitive Chesapeake Bay, as the nation's fourth-most-vulnerable to sea-level rise. Oceans are expected to rise a foot by 2050, according to a February report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Leading Democrats say the impact of inaction is too great, even though a small state cannot stop rising waters alone.

"Internationally, everyone's waiting for someone else to do something," said Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Prince George's), the Senate's chief architect on the bill. "People are on the sidelines watching history rather than attempting to shape history. ... Clearly we can't get it through Congress. And that's a mess. So I think it calls on the states to take action."

Even though Democrats who control the General Assembly disagree about whether the plan goes far enough, they quickly advanced the bill this week to present it to Hogan in time to override a potential veto before they're forced to adjourn April 11. Last year's climate change bill died in the final hours of the session in a standoff between Barve and Pinsky over its scope.

Hogan rarely weighs in on legislation before it reaches his desk. But in March, he issued a public statement calling the climate bill a "reckless and controversial energy tax."

"With inflation surging and energy prices at record highs, this is the absolute worst possible time for policies that raise costs for consumers," he said, without explaining how it would do that. "While we share the goal of protecting our environment and combating climate change - and have made historic progress - putting the costs on Marylanders is no solution."

Hogan spokesman Michael Ricci did not respond to a request for comment, but he tweeted a link to a U.S. News & World Report article ranking Maryland as the nation's fourth-greenest state, based on state policy and other factors.

Pinsky and Barve hoped to make Maryland the first state in the country to bar using natural gas to heat and cool newly constructed buildings. Several liberal-leaning cities have passed similar electrification laws, prompting state lawmakers in more than a dozen Republican-leaning states to preemptively prohibit municipal bans on natural gas heating over concerns it would reduce consumer choice.

Maryland's bill, called the Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022, still seeks to transition off natural gas, which emits more carbon than renewable sources of electricity. The bill requires state agencies to determine how much capacity exists in the electric grid and write recommendations to make sure there's enough moving forward.

It's one of several pieces that spells out the policy the state wants to tackle next, including pouring resources into environmental justice initiatives and helping communities near incinerators or highways that have poor air quality. Climate scientists say the increasing atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide and methane, have fueled rising global temperatures.

The law passed both chambers on a party-line vote, with some Republicans objecting to drastic measures and others noting that Maryland is making sacrifices unlikely to move the needle on global climate change.

"There was no measurable impact on the environment by this bill," Senate Minority Leader Bryan W. Simonaire (R-Anne Arundel) said. "It would not save the planet. It wouldn't stop the floods, the fires, in Maryland. Not one single one."

Simonaire objected specifically to the plan to make large, privately owned buildings of 35,000 square feet or larger reduce emissions and become carbon neutral by 2040 - or face fines and other penalties from the state.

"It mandates billions of retrofits. It still says it's the intent of the General Assembly to basically ban gas in new construction and existing buildings, that going forward that's our intention," he said. "We should be putting this energy at the national level, and more so at the global level, so that we can have real impact, so that we can really save the planet and not focus on being a role model. ...It's a good thing to be a role model, but at what expense?"

Of the 11 states with goals to become carbon neutral, Maryland would become the third to reach that milestone as soon as 2045, according to the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, an environmental policy think tank. (California and Virginia have also set that goal.)

Twenty-two states and the District have set goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, though the speed and magnitude of those goals vary greatly and make them difficult to compare. Of the 11 states pegging reductions to emissions levels in 2005 or 2006, Maryland's new goal seeks the highest percentage reduction by 2031.

Maryland's proposed carbon neutrality goal beats President Biden's goal to make the federal government carbon neutral by 2050.

Environmental and public health groups praised passage of the bill as critical to improving local air quality and modeling policies that could be adopted at a national scale. The proposal would also research and identify environmental inequality, documenting how many communities of color have more polluted air or fewer trees because of decades of what the bill calls a lack of environmental justice.

Barve said Maryland already feels the squeeze of climate change and cannot wait to act.

"We're losing farmland to rising sea level and we're losing our ski lodges to reduced snow," Barve said. "We're more and more polluting our lungs by having to inhale all this crap. Here's the thing: We cannot continue to treat the atmosphere of the Earth like the biggest running sewer on the planet, which is what we're doing right now."

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