

Sen. Pinsky: Gov. Hogan's lip service on the environment

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FULL TEXT

It's true: Larry Hogan is no Donald Trump when it comes to the environment. Unfortunately, Gov. Hogan is paying lip service to our climate-change crisis and doing a disservice to environmental protection efforts that offer real hope for our earth's future.

I say this with sadness. As chair of the Maryland Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, I have attempted to work with the governor's agency secretaries to protect our state's environment. But at the end of the day, they all have to answer to the governor, who would rather thumb his nose at environmental protection than advance it.

I have three specific examples that reveal a consistent pattern.

In 2016, I sponsored legislation that required our state government to come up with an action plan by Dec. 31, 2018, to slash greenhouse gas emissions in Maryland by 40%. The Department of the Environment missed the deadline by nine and a half months, and the draft plan the department finally produced late last month offers few quantifiable reductions and is incomplete.

The Hogan plan relies on as-yet unwritten legislation expected to be introduced to the legislature in 2020. In other words, the Hogan plan, already late, has kicked the can down the road and conditioned it on legislation that does not yet exist.

Maryland's 2016 environmental protection legislation also requires a final emissions reduction plan by the end of this year. But the Hogan administration has signaled it intends to blow right past that deadline as well. To make matters worse, the governor's eventual proposal appears likely to rely on new, untested, small-scale nuclear reactors. Yes, neighborhood nukes.

A second example: Earlier this year, the General Assembly in Annapolis passed legislation that requires more state environmental oversight over chicken houses on the Eastern Shore. The manure chickens generate frequently ends up as fertilizer that, in turn, pollutes nearby streams before fouling the Chesapeake Bay.

Why did lawmakers need to pass this legislation? Gov. Hogan's Department of the Environment had been waiving the permit fee charged chicken houses, the same fees that fund environmental enforcement in the chicken industry. The result? Over the last two years, chicken house inspections and audits have dropped 71% and enforcement actions last year fell by two-thirds.

The General Assembly's deputy attorney general, an official independent of the Hogan administration, has declared that the Hogan gang's latest chicken industry regulations run contrary to state law. In response, I requested that these regulations be withdrawn and resubmitted. The administration has not replied to my request.

A third example: Lawmakers in Annapolis have passed legislation that calls on Maryland to take a more aggressive stance against rising sea levels and higher-intensity storms. Our state's low-lying and coastal areas, scientists project, face severe flooding ahead. Two years ago, Marylanders watched on our TVs as a major hurricane and torrential rains flooded Houston. Maryland's sea-level legislation seeks to avoid a future Houston in Maryland. The law sets stricter building standards for roads and buildings funded with significant state dollars.

This legislation directs the state to take into account both rising sea levels and more intense storms. The Hogan administration hasn't done that. A Hogan government council came up with a deeply flawed alternative, a set of yet-to-be-implemented arbitrary building standards that would leave many state projects at risk.

Maryland lawmakers have also passed legislation that requires the state to come up with a plan on “salt water intrusion,” a major threat to agriculture. Crops can’t grow well when the soil they’re sitting in turns too salty. Sadly, at a legislative briefing last month, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources couldn’t even say how many acres of farmland now stand at risk.

Having a Maryland state administration drag its feet on—or simply refuse to comply with—one piece of major environmental legislation would be concerning. Watching this unfold on two pieces of pro-environment legislation would be alarming. And what about three instances? Three would show a clear pattern of resistance to environmental legislation.

I have seen the Hogan administration repeatedly flout environmental protection efforts. We deserve a governor who’s protecting our health and the health of our fragile environment. Larry Hogan isn’t.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Legislation; Greenhouse gases; Governors; Environmental protection; Emissions; Floods; Legislators
Location:	Maryland; Chesapeake Bay
People:	Trump, Donald J
Company / organization:	Name: Senate; NAICS: 921120; Name: Department of Natural Resources-Maryland; NAICS: 924110
Publication title:	The Baltimore Sun (Online); Baltimore
Publication year:	2019
Publication date:	Dec 3, 2019
Section:	Opinion - Op Ed
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Baltimore
Country of publication:	United States, Baltimore
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Opinions

ProQuest document ID: 2320951786

Document URL: <https://montgomery.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/sen-pinsky-gov-hogan-s-lip-service-on-environment/docview/2320951786/se-2?accountid=47412>

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Last updated: 2019-12-04

Database: U.S. Newsstream

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