



IMAGE: WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM/BEN HIDER

Washington Governor Jay Inslee Calls for Carbon Tax, Champions Climate Protection and Clean Energy

By John J. Berger, *Sustain Europe* U.S. Correspondent

Calling climate change an “existential threat,” Governor Jay Inslee of Washington, in an impassioned January State of the State speech, proposed a state tax on carbon and declared that it is the state’s destiny to defeat climate change and lead the nation toward a clean energy economy.

“It is time to step up and give our citizens what they demand and deserve — and what is the law — which is a fight against climate change and the damaging health effects of carbon pollution,” Inslee said.

Stating that passing a carbon tax is the right thing to do, Inslee proposed a modest \$20 per tonne carbon fee that would rise at 3.5 percent per year above the inflation rate to gradually constrict demand for fossil fuels in the state.

State legislators need to act, he said, “to save our children from an endless cycle of crop-killing droughts one year and rivers spilling their banks the next. To save salmon from dying in ever-warming rivers and our forests from

being reduced to plumes of ash.

“We have allowed the unfettered release of carbon pollution into our air. That burden will be carried by our children, our economy, our security, and our quality of life. We must be victorious over climate change, because, as Winston Churchill said, ‘... without victory, there is no survival.’ ”

The carbon tax would go into effect in the 2020 budget year and within four years would generate \$3.3 billion in revenue, according to a report in *The Seattle Times*. That revenue “would allow the state to reinvest in all the things that drive down emissions,” the Governor said.

“We can build more solar panels. We can put more electric cars on the road. We can help more Washingtonians purchase energy-saving insulation for their homes and businesses.”

To avoid inflicting economic hardship and perhaps to blunt potential political opposition, aviation and agricultural

fuels along with some energy-intensive business engaged in foreign trade will be exempt from the new levy.

When still a congressman in 2008, Inslee, co-authored a book called *Apollo’s Fire: Igniting America’s Clean Energy Economy* and earned a reputation in Congress as a leading advocate of renewable energy.

Since his election as governor in 2012 and reelection in 2016, Inslee has tried to make Washington state a proving ground for the clean energy vision he first espoused in his book, but support in the state legislature has fallen short.

Although Democrats have been in control of the state House of Representatives since 2002, until recently, the governor’s efforts to pass clean energy legislation have at times been thwarted by a Republican-controlled State Senate.

It refused in 2015 to consider a moderate cap-and-trade bill Inslee supported, and a state carbon tax long favoured by the governor would also have been dead on arrival.

Left: Governor Inslee speaks at the plenary session “The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Technology-Driven, Human-Centred.” The World Economic Forum holds the Sustainable Development Impact Summit 2017 in New York, USA

Right: Gov. Jay Inslee meeting with British Columbia Premier John Horgan in Victoria B.C., Nov. 21, 2017, where they discussed trade, climate change and stronger transportation links between the regions



IMAGE: FLICR.COM

In what could be a turning point for Washington’s clean energy future, however, voters on Nov. 7 gave control of the state’s Senate to the Democrats in a special district election. The coming months will now reveal whether the governor will be able to fully implement his ambitious climate protection, clean energy and job-creation agenda.

The governor has already made clear where he stands on these issues and the extent to which his policies diverge from the Trump Administration’s. Governor Inslee has referred to climate change — which the president has famously called “a hoax” — as a “slow-motion disaster movie.”

Governor Inslee is eager to implement bold, ambitious measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Washington state. In 2014, he signed a broad executive order, the “Washington Carbon Pollution Reduction and Clean Energy Action,” to reduce the state’s greenhouse gas emissions while increasing its energy independence and economic competitiveness.

During his administration, the governor has been a strong proponent of clean energy technology, including the use of electric vehicles and the development of clean power storage devices, and biofuels, as well as electric ferries and electric ultra-high-speed rail.

Governor Inslee was a co-founder in 2015 with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and California Governor Jerry Brown of the U.S. Climate Alliance. The bipartisan alliance of states is committed to fulfilling the terms of the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

The 15 member-states in the alliance account for 40 percent of the nation’s economic output. “We’d be the third

largest economy in the world, if we were a nation,” Inslee said.

While the president champions coal, Governor Inslee in November joined a newly established international coalition known as the Powering Past Coal Alliance that aims to phase out coal power and ban new coal power plants unless they can capture their carbon emissions.

Inslee is also allied with the governors of California, Oregon, and the premier of British Columbia and various cities in the Pacific Coast Collaborative, representing 55 million people with a \$3 trillion economy. The regional partnership is committed to accelerating the arrival of a low-carbon future with thriving, sustainable communities.

Governor Inslee sees the West Coast as a blueprint. “This is how you build a thriving, innovative economy that combats climate change and embraces a zero-emission future,” Inslee said in a Nov. 13 statement from his office. “We know it’s possible because we’re doing it.”

Inslee is also a founding member of the Under2 Coalition. Members are committed to keeping global temperature from rising over 2° by reducing their carbon emissions 80 to 95 percent below their 1990 levels by 2050, or by limiting per capita annual greenhouse gas emissions to two tonnes a year.

Whereas Governor Inslee regards climate change as a global emergency, he sees it simultaneously as a tremendous economic opportunity. According to the Governor (see Q&A, below), the State of Washington is explicitly destined to lead the world in clean energy.

As noted, however, Governor Inslee has found that his most ambitious clean energy plans were blocked by the state’s

Republican-controlled Senate. With it now in Democratic hands, the governor is at last in a position to rapidly advance his clean energy agenda. If he is successful, an incidental result might be greater national prominence.

I spoke at length with Governor Inslee recently at his office in Seattle to discuss his aspirations for the State of Washington and his views on what states and other subnational governments can do to accelerate the arrival of a clean energy economy without the federal government’s support. An edited version of that conversation follows. It was held prior to the special election that gave Democrats control of the state legislature.



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