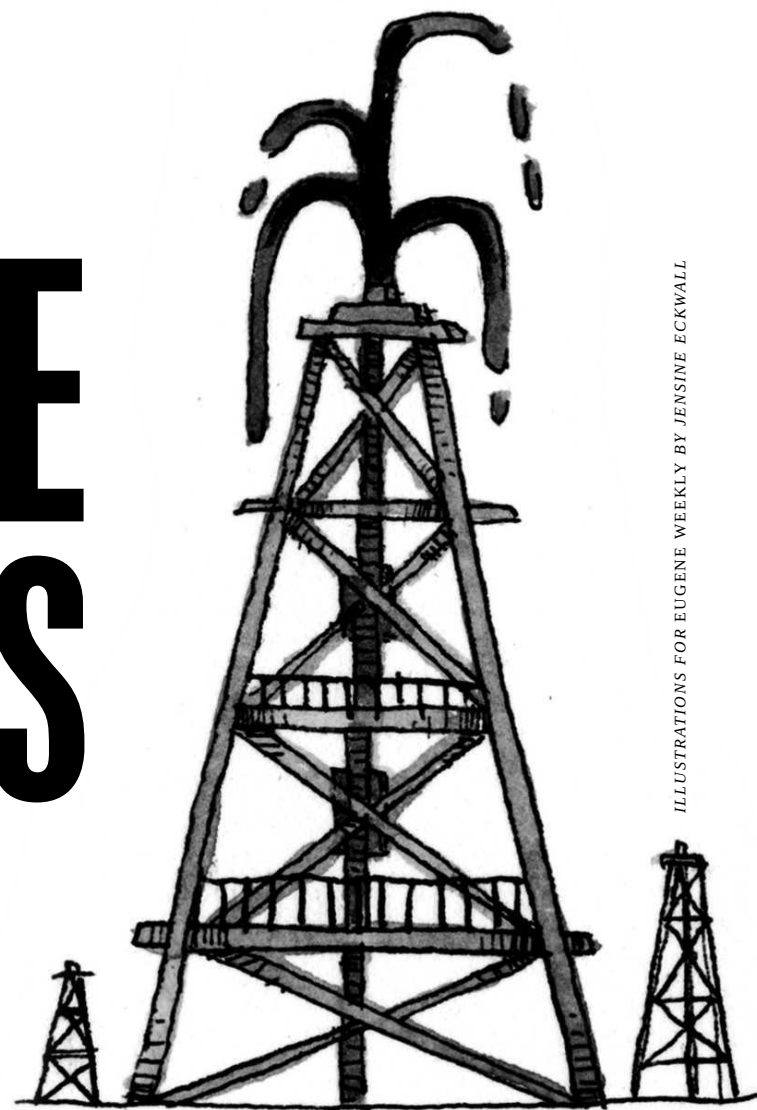


CLIMATE POLITICS

WILL OREGON'S LEGISLATURE STEP UP?

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN



ILLUSTRATIONS FOR EUGENE WEEKLY BY JENSINE ECKWALL

On Jan. 20, scientists from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced 2015 as the hottest year on record since record-keeping began in 1880.

Oregon itself experienced its hottest year since the state's records began in 1895. Phil Mote, director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute, says the state's "average temperature in 2015 was 50.4 degrees, not only a record but far above the average yearly temperature for the 20th century, which was 47.8 degrees." Mote attributes this to a combination of meteorological conditions and greenhouse gases.

Globally, NASA says, the sea level rose about 6.7 inches in the last century. The top 2,300 feet of the ocean has warmed by 0.302 degrees Fahrenheit since 1969. Antarctica lost about 36 cubic miles of ice between 2002 and 2005.

Glaciers all over the planet are receding. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the acidity of surface ocean waters has increased by about 30 percent.

Finally, NASA research shows that "the number of record high temperature events in the United States has been increasing, while the number of record low temperature events has been decreasing, since 1950. The U.S. has also witnessed increasing numbers of intense rainfall events."

A spate of warm weather on the East Coast was followed by this month's Snowzilla, burying Washington, D.C. and other major East Coast cities under a blanket of snow. Crocuses and other flowers are popping up in grassy areas all around Eugene, and it's 60 degrees outside. In January.

Global warming is a planetary issue with very local repercussions, and Tom Bowerman of PolicyInteractive research team says just picking away at pieces of the problem is not enough. Comprehensive legislation is needed to create change, and he hopes the Healthy Climate Act will do just that.

The Oregon State Legislature's upcoming short session is not a place where you normally get big policy passed, Bowerman says, but "the cost of delay is unacceptably high." Kristin Eberhard of the Sightline Institute, who did

research on the Healthy Climate Act, says action on climate change should have gotten under way 10 years ago.

The Healthy Climate Act is a "cap-and-invest" bill that will actually move Oregon to a "statewide greenhouse gas emissions limit for the year 2050 that limits greenhouse gas emissions to levels that are at least 75 percent below 1990 levels." In other words, Oregon would be calling a halt to the steady slide of climate change.

Statewide, nationally and globally, action on climate change is long overdue, and supporters of the HCA say the time for Oregon to act is now. But the bill faces opposition from the fossil fuel industry and the political process itself.

ALL IN FAVOR?

"Whereas climate change and ocean acidification caused by greenhouse gas emissions threaten to have significant detrimental effects on public health and the economic vitality, natural resources and environment of this state."

So reads the prospective text of the Healthy Climate Act, which State Sen. Chris Edwards plans to put forth in the February short session of the Oregon Legislature. As those who have long been in the fight to stop climate change can attest, it's not easy to get things done in government. It's even harder when you're up against big money, misinformation and Big Oil. But public health, natural resources and the economy are some of what's at stake.

Oregon has already passed legislation on greenhouse gas emissions. Back in 2007, the Legislature voted to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 10 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 and 75 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. But as Bowerman says in frustration, those reductions have no teeth; they were merely goals and nonbinding.

Bowerman and others tried to get legislation passed in the regular 2015 session, but even on urgent issues Oregon's government can be slow moving. Bowerman says he looked at 19 pieces of legislation dealing with climate in that session and was "disappointed" because each had constitutional, performance or political viability issues.

Bowerman put his research into Oregon House Bill

3470 — the Climate Stability & Justice Act of 2015 — which would have committed Oregon to meeting its existing, scientifically based, climate pollution limits. All the other bills fell by the wayside and Bowerman was hopeful HB 3470 would pass, but a transportation funding bill "took up all the oxygen in the room."

The current bill, the Healthy Climate Act, is backed both by the research of Bowerman's PolicyInteractive and by that of nonprofit research center Sightline Institute. In the Legislature it's sponsored by Sen. Edwards as well as by Sen. Lee Beyer, chair of the Business and Transportation committee. The HCA had its first hearing on Jan. 14 in the legislative committee days that precede the session in a joint meeting of the Senate Environment and Natural Resources and House Energy and Environment committees.

The bill does not yet have a number, and its text is still in flux; however, its end goals remain clear. It calls on the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality to limit climate pollution and create a market-based program to meet those limits.

According to Edwards, it is a "cap-and-invest" approach that "would cap greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through the auction of allowances by the state to emitting entities. The proceeds from the sale of allowances will be invested in utility bill rate relief, GHG reduction, and community and economic adaptation and resilience to climate change."

Basically, polluters such as facilities or companies emitting more than 25,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide a year are given a cap on what they can emit. Anything above that cap and they must buy allowances, sold at auction by the DEQ. The money paid by the polluting industries is then invested back into reducing greenhouse gas emissions or, Edwards says, "investments that will increase community and economic resistance in face of climate change."

Over time, the state would slowly decrease the number of allowances auctioned off each year, reducing their supply and increasing their cost and thus incentivizing companies to reduce emissions.

Supporters say that capping carbon pollution reduces the risk of heat-related illness and death, pollution-induced asthma and the spread of disease. The young, the elderly