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Worcester fights global warming

John Monahan Environment

Earth Day 2005 finds a troubled environmental movement, burgeoning with ideas to help in the race to save the planet but frustrated by a lack of government leadership on key fronts.

The Kyoto Treaty to slow global warming is now in effect. An extraordinary worldwide effort, it holds no guarantees of succeeding as it set goals for participating nations to start their economies on a path toward lower carbon emissions over the next decade. It took effect in February after a decade of international negotiations.

Only four industrialized nations have opted out — Australia, Liechtenstein, Monaco and the United States.

But here in the energy-rich U.S., environmentalists are finding some hope for progress in the many states that are developing Kyoto-style goals to reduce carbon emissions locally, according to a rundown in the most recent Environmental Issues Report, the newsletter of the Regional Environmental Council of Worcester.

The editors pointed to an energy initiative co-sponsored by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson that sets a goal of 30,000 megawatts of clean energy in the West by 2015. In the Northeast, regional plans are working to slow what has been a steady increase of carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels, without much federal support.

Massachusetts, for example, has adopted a broad approach that includes use of more alternative fuels and low-emission vehicles, promotion of alternative energy sources and green building initiatives.

Meanwhile, the White House and Congress have stuck to their position that the Kyoto goals are bad for the economy and continue to reject international studies confirming that unprecedented climate change linked to global warming is well under way.

What's Worcester doing? Well the REC has a lot happening on the global warming front.

The REC and Mayor Timothy P. Murray have teamed up to promote an initiative to cut down on municipal energy use and municipal energy bills. Together, they have completed the first step of an inventory of global warming energy use in the city and next will set reduction targets that a local Energy Task Force will oversee.

The city has also made a new commitment to find 20 percent of its electricity from alternative nonpolluting sources by 2010, a very ambitious — but, they maintain, feasible — goal.

A campaign is also under way to get Massachusetts Electric Co. customers in the city to purchase a portion of their electricity from renewable sources. The renewable energy options are available now for an additional \$4 to \$12 per month on home and business electric bills.

Under a special program developed as part of the REC-sponsored program, additional consumer payments are matched and doubled by the Mass. Tech Collaborative. For

every dollar a consumer pays for renewable energy, up to \$1 will be given to the city and up to \$1 more will be given to low-income areas of the state for clean energy projects.

Billing and service are handled by Massachusetts Electric; participants can enroll or cancel at any time, through the Massachusetts Energy Consumers Alliance (1-800-287-3950 or www.massenergy.com); CET & CSG (1-800-689-7957 or GreenerWattsNewEngland.com); or Community Energy (1-866-WIND-123 or NewWindEnergy.com).

The REC campaign is aiming to get 2,000 Worcester households to purchase clean energy by the end of June. The city would receive a bonus grant of \$50 per house that would bring at least \$100,000 for clean energy projects in the city.

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U.S. Rep. John S. McCain 3rd, R-Ariz., sent out a note last week on what he referred to as the “growing crisis” of global warming.

“Left unchecked we can expect glaciers and polar ice caps to melt, severe storms to become more frequent, prolonged droughts to devastate agricultural lands, sea levels to rise and entire ecosystems to be thrown out of balance.”

He said when the bill he and Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn, crafted two years ago — the McCain-Lieberman Climate Stewardship Act — was first proposed, most national policymakers and commentators “didn’t give it much of a chance.”

Since then, he said, 42 senators have lined up in favor of the measure, which takes a market-based approach to reducing fossil fuel pollution. Mr. McCain appealed for public support and urged people to visit the Environmental Defense Action Network Web site to find out how to help work for passage.

On another front, Massachusetts Attorney General Thomas Reilly is playing a key role in a multi-state legal challenge designed to get carbon dioxide listed as a pollutant and regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Arguments in the 12-state lawsuit against the EPA were heard Friday in Washington. James McCaffrey of the Massachusetts Sierra Club applauded Mr. Reilly’s work on the case.

“The EPA clearly has the authority, as granted by Congress under the Clean Air Act, to protect the public from the growing threat of global warming. Instead of hiding behind a cloud of smoke, the EPA should be acting now to protect the health and safety of U.S. citizens,” Mr. McCaffrey said.

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Locally there will be a lot of conservation, watershed protection, clean air, clean energy, community garden and wildlife protection efforts being celebrated in Worcester as REC holds its annual Earth Day festival May 1 at Institute Park.

The group will also be launching the largest citywide neighborhood cleanup in Worcester since last Earth Day as it once again teams up with local companies, the city and hundreds of volunteers April 30.

For more information on both events, call REC at (508) 799-9139.