

Further, Faster: How the US Climate Alliance is Driving Greater Climate Ambition and Action

By Julie Cerqueira,

The U.S. Climate Alliance is a coalition of governors committed to supporting and upholding the goals of the Paris Agreement. This initiative was launched in June 2017 by the governors of California, New York and Washington after President Trump announced his intent to withdraw the United States from this international accord. Three and a half years later, the Alliance has grown into a bipartisan coalition of 25 U.S. governors spanning the country. Notably, these governors have made climate action a top priority and are working together – on the frontlines – to protect their communities, rebuild their economies and create family-sustaining jobs. Collectively, this group now represents more than half of the U.S. population, 60 percent of U.S. GDP and 40 percent of U.S. emissions. To put these figures in perspective, only the United States and China have larger economies. And if this coalition was its own country, it would be the sixth largest emitter in the world. That’s real scale – and impact.

To help states achieve their goals, the Alliance focuses its work on three specific objectives. First, we help states implement and achieve their policy priorities by providing technical assistance and a platform to collaborate on solutions and strategies and share best practices and challenges. Second, we elevate and amplify the voice of these governors, both internally and externally. When 25 governors come together around a single issue, commitment or request - that resonates. There is true strength in numbers. Finally, we seek – and push – multistate climate action and solutions that can drive markets and help the U.S. rebuild a national framework for climate action. Notably, this unified, coordinated approach is already helping create a roadmap for further climate action at both the state and federal level.

This state-led action is possible, in part, because of the highly decentralized structure of authority in the U.S. Under this system, U.S. governors, through executive and regulatory action, and state legislatures, through legislative action, have tremendous power. So too do cities and even small towns, which continue to find ways to confront the climate crisis. This arrangement has allowed states and local governments to get things done – even in the absence of federal action or guidance. It has also made it possible for coalitions, like the Alliance, to drive national policies and impact national emissions in ways they otherwise couldn’t in a highly centralized system of government.

This state authority and action has taken on considerably more importance in recent years as the Trump administration has moved to undo a broad array of climate regulations, policies and actions. This includes attempting to vacate critical methane rules, refusing to ratify the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol to reduce hydrofluorocarbons, and pushing to weaken standards limiting vehicle emissions – the primary source of pollution in the U.S. Through all of this, states not only backstopped federal rules unwound by the Trump administration, they also pushed forward with even more advanced, ambitious policies.

In fact, nine Alliance states have set economy-wide carbon neutrality goals by mid-century or earlier and 16 have 100 percent clean energy goals. Another 16 members of our coalition limit vehicle emissions through nation-leading clean car standards. Alliance states are also regulating

oil, gas, methane and hydrofluorocarbons, implementing aggressive appliance and building efficiency standards and pursuing new nature-based climate solutions. Perhaps most importantly, Alliance states have continued to demonstrate – and prove – that this sort of climate action goes hand-in-hand with economic growth and prosperity. From 2005 to 2018, for example, Alliance states increased economic output by 16 percent per capita, while decreasing emissions by 14 percent – far outpacing the rest of the country. These states also outpaced the rest of the nation in clean energy employment, adding more than 133,000 new jobs in this sector from 2016 to 2019. They also employed more than 2.1 million Americans in these good-paying jobs before the pandemic. It's no coincidence or surprise then that these state-led policies make up the building blocks of the Biden administration's climate plan.

With a new resident at the White House, and a drastic swing in policy priorities, there is a valuable opportunity to forge a new kind of state-federal climate partnership – and get even more done together through greater coordination and collaboration. The Alliance's governors, in particular, have an important role to play in helping the U.S. not just meet new climate goals, including net-zero emissions by mid-century, but also in expanding ambition. These states have long served as the country's innovators and accelerators, testing and pushing new ideas and policies before they're scaled up nationally.

Additionally, states and the federal government have a chance to share technical, policy and scientific expertise, assistance and resources. In the near term, Alliance states are well positioned to support the new administration as it works to backfill the numerous government entities hollowed out by the Trump administration. And while many of the Trump administration's climate-related orders and rule changes can and will be quickly reversed by the Biden administration, it will be up to these states to protect against further damage while other more time consuming and durable federal regulatory, legislative and policy fixes are pursued.

Given the crisis we face and the limited time we have, it's clear we need all hands on deck. We need more leadership – and action – at every level of government. And we need more collaboration. Everyone has a role to play. The Alliance and its governors know our future is at stake. No matter the headwinds, we will continue to press forward together.