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Sharing Knowledge – Developing Joint Action to Address Climate Change

PROCEEDINGS

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First U.S. – European Conference of Metropolitan Regional Councils

Sharing Knowledge – Developing Joint Action to Address Climate Change

Conflicting perspectives, confrontational tones and divergent views on climate change and energy conservation often define the transatlantic relationship at the national level. Differences persist between U.S. and European governments over international and national-level cap-and-trade policies, emissions targets and other climate and energy-related topics. But at the sub-national level, a dynamic and positive set of relations between European and American climate and energy actors is evolving characterized by very productive results and positive dialogue. It was in this



context that the “First U.S.-European Conference of Metropolitan Regional Areas” was created. The conference brought together regional leaders from U.S. and European metropolitan regions to share and exchange innovative regional climate and energy programs from both continents. The conference also promoted the development of more formal mechanisms for the exchange and application of innovative climate and energy conservation programs between the U.S. and Europe. Finally, the conference highlighted the mutual environmental and economic benefits that could be realized by U.S. and European metropolitan regions through long-term cooperation and learning.

Over the course of the two-day conference, more than 170 senior policymakers and technical experts representing over 40 U.S. and European metropolitan regions met to initiate the first transatlantic network of metropolitan regions and areas. By every measure, the conference was an exceptional success. A non-binding Declaration of Cooperation was signed by officials representing the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOCG), the National Association of Regional Councils, the Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas (METREX), and the Verband Region Stuttgart, Germany. Already, follow-up activities are underway, including the potential testing and application of a European regional emissions inventory program in the United States.

Desire for Formal Learning and Information Exchanges

The fact that climate change is real and its effects are no longer disputed was the predominant theme of the welcoming remarks. MWCOCG Chairman Hon. Michael Knapp addressed the need for local governments to work regionally to address this global challenge. Dr. Bernd Steinacher, Regionaldirektor of the Stuttgart Regional Council (Verband Region Stuttgart)

reinforced Knapp's message about the serious threat of climate change. Dr. Steinacher repeated the sobering statistics of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and reminded the conference participants that, while metropolitan regions comprise less than two percent of the earth's surface, they contribute over 80 percent of all greenhouse gases.

Neal Peirce, syndicated columnist for the Washington Post Writers Group, kicked-off the conference with a thoughtful discussion on the environmental and economic relevance of regions on both continents. Peirce affirmed that "Metros are not just part of the national economy, they are the national economy," and added that U.S. and European regions stand to benefit economically and environmentally from the exchange of applications of innovative renewable energy, transportation, "green" building and energy conservation policies. However, despite the economic and environmental influence of metropolitan regions, conference panelists called attention to the few or inadequate institutional mechanisms supporting formal cooperation between U.S. and European regional authorities. Worse, as Peirce said, "when American city groups do travel overseas to learn, there's a sort of automatic assumption they're just on a 'junket,' a pleasure trip, not an exploration of potential serious import." But the economic, environmental realities and precedents suggest just the opposite – the U.S. and European metropolitan regions can learn from each other - and must.

The panel discussion on "Strengthening Formal Cooperation" focused on the theme of mutual benefits when U.S. and European regional councils cooperate. The powerfully interrelated economies of metropolitan regions on both continents have the potential to translate into reciprocal exchanges of ideas and policies affecting climate change and energy. Dale Medearis, senior environmental planner for the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, stressed the value of long-term cooperation and exchanges between officials of U.S. and European regional councils that are built on goal-oriented, problem-focused



"We have a moral and political responsibility to lead by example and not by declarations."

John Bruton, EU Ambassador



"Metro[politan regions] are the heartbeat of America."

Neal Peirce, Syndicated Columnist



"If we shift 10 percent of passenger car trips in the U.S. to transit, rail and bus and other modes, we could save 550 million barrels of oil per year, the amount that we are importing from Saudi Arabia."

James Oberstar, U.S. Congressman

exchanges. He added that this learning should be reinforced with research and information that study the policy context of particular climate policy innovations and the performance of those policies as well as how innovations from Europe could transfer and work in the U.S. Dr. Steinacher praised the work of American regional councils in efforts to address climate change and sustainability. He said it appears that climate and energy efforts by U.S. local and regional authorities may not fully be appreciated in the U.S., but they are recognized and highly valued in Europe.

A New Era of Cooperation

Strengthening the exchange and application of innovative climate and energy policies between U.S. and European metropolitan regions was moved to new levels with the signing of the first “Declaration of Cooperation Between Metropolitan Regions and Areas of the United States and Europe.” Hon. Penelope Gross, a member of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, Hon. Betty Knight, representing the National Association of Regional Councils, Secretary General Roger Read on behalf of METREX, Dr. Bernd Steinacher from the Verband Region Stuttgart, and Hon. Michael Knapp, Chairman of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, signed the Declaration. The non-binding Declaration calls for these organizations and their members to work on long-term exchanges of knowledge, data, policies, best practices and practitioners on sustainable climate change policies – including greenhouse gas emissions reductions, energy efficiency, “green” buildings and sustainable transportation. It also calls for the development of formal technical and policy research between universities and research institutes in Europe and the United States.

Sustaining the Creative Exchange

On the second day of the conference, EU Ambassador John Bruton talked about the importance of sub-national actors in the transatlantic climate and energy relationship. Ambassador Bruton asserted that climate change is a “global problem” that can be “solved locally,” and stressed that transatlantic partnerships are at their best when sharing occurs on the local and regional levels. He added the transatlantic economic partnership is the largest

“As a child, I learned the United States is a country without limits. Here is a challenge without limits. You can do it!”

Dr. Bernd Steinacher

in the world and that in the context of these inextricable economic relations, is the basis of solid and practical climate, energy and environmental partnerships.

Metropolitan regions in Europe and the United States account for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions on both continents. Moreover, the building and transportation sectors together comprise approximately 80 percent of carbon dioxide emissions in European and U.S. metropolitan regions. The conference highlighted the innovative transportation and building policies being developed by metropolitan regions to reduce vehicle miles traveled and promote energy efficient housing and buildings. The panel on “Green Buildings” highlighted one of the most understudied contributors

of greenhouse gas emissions – the need to thoughtfully address energy efficiency in the built environment, particularly the sticky issue of retrofitting existing buildings. Dr. Reinhard Loske, the Environmental Senator from the City of Bremen, talked about the EU and German building “certificate” laws that have mandated the labeling of a building’s energy performance – notions that could be applied in the U.S. The energy efficiency building codes, design standards and support for renewable energy – especially solar – were highlighted as policies worth transferring from Europe to the U.S.



Reducing vehicle miles traveled is fundamental to any metropolitan region’s planning for climate change. Officials from the U.S. and Europe spoke about the need to stem rising vehicle miles traveled rates, with U.S. regions stating that VMT have been rising at a much higher rate than population. Close to 40 percent of all energy in Europe and the United States is consumed in the transportation sector. In his keynote speech, Congressman Hon. James Oberstar (Minnesota) talked about the vital importance of regional councils and planning organizations in developing and maintaining the nation’s transportation and climate programs. Congressman Oberstar explained that transportation is one of the single biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, and indicated the U.S. should lead the way toward solutions. The European Union has shown significant leaderships in employing high speed intercity rail, and we need to make similar investments in the United States. Congressman Oberstar also talked about the need for a mode shift of at least 10 percent from passenger car to transit, rail, bus and other modes and stressed the need for Metropolitan Planning Organizations to be direct recipients of federal transportation funds. He talked about the need to develop bicycle infrastructure, develop population density around transit stops, create safe routes to school, and mitigate the “sharp edges” between transportation modes.

Actionable Follow-Up

The prevailing paradigm of transatlantic environmental relations is shifting. The tremendous benefits of importing lessons related to sustainable development and effective energy and climate policies between European and U.S. metropolitan regions pays back with both interest and dividends. The conference affirmed that regional councils are leaders in the work to address climate change. Conference follow-up has already begun. Planned activities include a meeting of officials from U.S. and European regional councils at the next METREX conference in London, October 2008. The purpose will be the review and testing of the EU “Greenhouse Gas Regional Inventory Project” (GRIP) project in regions such as Washington, D.C. It is anticipated that GRIP will be an ideal complement to existing regional greenhouse gas inventory efforts and can strengthen regional climate mitigation scenarios and planning.

Conference Sessions

Advancing Economic Development

The panel discussion on “Advancing Economic Development” highlighted the stunning success many European regions have had in merging actionable climate and energy policies. For example, Germany is on track to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 21 percent (against 1990 levels), but its energy consumption per dollar of GDP is 50 percent that of the United States. Moreover, the renewable energy sector in Germany employs over 215,000 people. If growth trends continue, by 2020 the sector will employ over 500,000. The South-



western Pennsylvania Regional Commission developed a regional vision statement where transportation and land use support and enhance the regional economy. Brownfield reclamation for mixed use development and the renovation of existing buildings to LEED certification standards improved Pittsburgh’s image, attracted more residents, increased the tax base and resulted in improved economic development opportunities.

Innovative Transportation Planning

The panel discussion on “Transportation Planning” highlighted the ways in which regions have successfully adopted regional climate strategies and pursued economic development in the context of sustainable transportation planning innovations. Gunnar Söderholm of Stockholm, Sweden, shared how the region’s emissions from cars were reduced by 30 percent within the inner city over five years through the introduction of congestion pricing. Mike McKeever of the Sacramento Council of Governments shared his region’s success in reducing in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by blending public transit and small-lot zoning policies. Jürgen Ludwig of the Verband Region Stuttgart credited his region’s reductions of VMTs through the strong support of a regionally managed public transit system governed and operated by the Stuttgart regional council - a regionally elected parliament.

Regional Climate Action Plans

The session on “Regional Climate Actions” highlighted the holistic approaches that regions such as Paris, Southwest Pennsylvania and Helsinki were taking to address climate change. Helsinki has linked climate, economic development and regional transportation planning. Irma Karjalainen reported that the Helsinki Metropolitan Area’s climate action efforts focus on reducing emissions from cars and that over 62 percent of all trips within Helsinki are on public transportation. The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments reported that the Washington, D.C., region and its population of 4.9 million emits 65.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂). Finland, with its population of 5.2 million, emits less than 57.0 tons. Genevieve Danchin from Paris-Ile de France region, reported that by 2050, the region plans to meet one-third of its energy demands through renewable energy.

Climate Change and Water Management

The session on “Regional Water Management” focused on the challenges of adaptation and responses to the problems regions, localities and utilities must now confront due to climate change impacts on available potable water supply. Regions must be prepared for drought and/or excessive surface water runoff, both of which may be detrimental to drinking water supplies. The City of Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, shared its innovative integrated vision for limiting drinking water and agricultural impacts due to rising sea level within the city. The vision combines the city’s problems with the problem of excessive water. In addition, water management (treatment, disposal and transport) in the UK constitutes approximately 12 to 15 percent of greenhouse gas emissions for the entire country. Panelists agreed that solid data is necessary to support the development of mitigation and adaptation action plans.

“Expect the unexpected when it comes to climate change.”

Dr. Bruce Horton

Greenhouse Gas Inventories

The session on “Greenhouse Gas Inventories” looked at the ways in which the EU Regional Greenhouse Gas Inventory Project works and could be applied to regions such as Northern Virginia. Many local authorities in the metropolitan Washington region disparately collect data and develop inventories, baselines and goals for greenhouse gas emissions. Consensus emerged that regional authorities stand to gain from the further testing and application of an EU GRIP-like model to inventory greenhouse gas emissions.

Strategies for Social Inclusion and Planning for Climate Change

The panel on “Strategies for Social Inclusion and Planning for Climate Change” stressed that local communities and elected officials must be engaged and feel empowered to take action toward mitigating, adapting and generally preparing for climate change. Since each region and locality have a unique set of challenges, messages and solutions must be tailored toward the local residents, businesses and elected officials. Strategies should focus on promoting good practices for energy conservation and renewable energy production, increasing economic opportunities, applying appropriate regional planning to limit dependency on non-renewable energy sources and protecting green infrastructure to the extent possible.

Identifying Best Practices in Energy Conservation for the Built Environment

The panel on identifying best practices in the built environment agreed that success relies on addressing the challenge of the existing built environment, a major contributor of CO₂. As Dr. Reinhard Loske, Senator for City Planning in Bremen, Germany, noted, “House values, as energy prices increase, will be lower if energy efficiency is low.” Retrofitting buildings requires funding mechanisms and expertise at the local municipal level. For example, Bremen offers supported mortgages for lower energy buildings. Panelists agreed that building codes need

to include energy efficiency requirements. The panel recommended the education of plan reviewers, building inspectors and the construction industry. “Local and regional government is where we can get things done,” stressed Joan Kelsch, an environmental planner from Arlington County, Virginia, who also advocated for adopting a consistent set of green building standards, such as the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED standards. As Dr. Georg Reichard of Virginia Tech noted, best practices require “economic driven leadership in design.”

Taking Measure – Establishing Regional Greenhouse Gas Inventories

The panel presented challenges and approaches to establishing regional greenhouse gas inventories. Monterey, California; the Tyndall Centre in Manchester, England, UK; and Glasgow, Scotland, UK have established greenhouse gas inventories to support more informed decision making. Nick Papadakis of Monterey, California, developed an inventory as part of the regional energy plan to reduce greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by 2020. The inventory includes local building capacities, energy conservation and efficiencies, clean renewable energy sources and distribution, and the impacts of transportation. Papadakis noted there is a “disconnect between planning and implementation when one hasn’t taken inventory globally or statewide even if one expects reductions.” Dr. Sebastian Carney of the Tyndall Centre presented the Tyndall Centre’s comprehensive Greenhouse Gas Regional Inventory Project.

**“Empower the local community.
Empower the local officials, to
do something.”**

Chester Jourdan

GRIP is comprised of two parts: a regional greenhouse gas inventory methodology, with an associated online program; and an energy emissions scenario tool - that allows an operator to assess the carbon implications of different energy futures. Dr. Grahame Buchan of the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Joint Structure Plan Committee described how Glasgow uses GRIP to inform deci-

sion makers on different planning scenarios. “As strategic planners, GRIP gets people to join in the planning process.” In addition, Dr. Buchan noted the program “gets decision makers to play.” He indicated it was important to have people from different sectors in the room who gain by learning how one’s actions impact the others. Council Member Hon. Nancy Floreen of Montgomery County, Maryland, described how the metropolitan Washington area has developed a general inventory as well as the challenges faced by politicians when implementing changes within current state and federal limitations.

“This project has been made possible by funding from the European Commission. The European Commission is not responsible for the contents of the project.”

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