

Environmental Watch

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Seattle's Kyoto Accounting Hides Emissions Increases and Policy Failures

by Todd Myers

Claim

"We should all be proud of achieving the Kyoto goal. We have shown the world that reducing climate pollution is an economic opportunity and it inspires us to do even more," said Nickels. "Now is the time to take action on the international, national and local levels, recognizing that every household can and must make a difference."

Former Mayor Greg Nickels, Climate Progress Press Release, December 8, 2009

"'I'd say the city of Seattle did better than I expected' during the last three years."

Sightline Executive Director Alan Durning, quoted in the Seattle Times, December 9, 2009

"The accounting protocol for carbon is new accounting. ... What you're talking about is a consumption protocol that says everything a city of Seattle resident buys we should figure out the embedded carbon. The science is not quite there to do that calculation. ... We do not calculate it that way."

Mike Mann, former head of Seattle's Office of Sustainability, February 11, 2010

Facts

One of the centerpiece claims of Mayor Greg Nickels' administration, was his success in reducing carbon emissions within the city limits. The basis for those claims is a report released in 2005, and again in 2008, saying Seattle's carbon emissions are seven percent below 1990 levels, thus meeting the target established in the Kyoto Protocol.

In the "Seattle Climate Protection Initiative Progress Report 2009," Nickels boasts that "our total greenhouse gas emissions are well below 1990 levels." This success, he argues, is evidence his policies worked and that "they have inspired action on climate policy in Washington, D.C." Many environmental activists praised these results, citing them as justification for the mandatory policies they advocate for Washington state and the nation.

But the Mayor's efforts on climate policy are a failure. The 2008 Seattle Community Greenhouse Gas Inventory demonstrates that since the Mayor's effort began in 2005, emissions have increased. Worse, that inventory:

- uses numerous accounting tricks to hide many of Seattle's carbon emissions
- does not relate emissions reductions to Seattle policies
- takes credit for reductions in the state, claiming a portion of them for the City

Two clear lessons emerge for Seattle, and cities looking to follow in Nickels' steps. City officials spent a great deal of taxpayer money but achieved few results, missing opportunities to make real environmental improvements. Second, the City's efforts at lifestyle-modification have failed to change the behavior of residents. In many areas, in fact, the reductions in per-capita carbon emissions have lagged behind Washington and the nation. If Seattle is serious about reducing



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carbon emissions, it will have to turn to other approaches, or the City will find itself over the Kyoto target limits in 2012.

Cutting Emissions by Assigning Them to Others

The first challenge in creating a credible calculation for emissions reductions in Seattle is to determine what to count and what to leave out. This is critical because carbon emissions anywhere have an equal impact on climate change. The total impact Seattle has on the climate is equal to the carbon footprint of all the residents and businesses. Seattle's official carbon inventory, however, does not measure that. Instead it counts only those emissions that actually occur inside the city limits of Seattle. This system actually rewards activities that increase the total worldwide carbon emissions, as long as those emissions don't occur in Seattle.

For instance, much of Seattle's industrial emissions are a result of the operations of the concrete plant in South Seattle. If that plant was closed, or reduced its production, Seattle officials would count it as a reduction in total carbon emissions, even if an equal amount of concrete were imported from companies outside Seattle. Since that concrete would now have to be shipped into the city, total worldwide emissions would likely increase. The emissions from production and shipping, however, would not show up in Seattle's accounting, making it appear as if the city had reduced its impact, even though its real impact increased.

This is not only true for concrete, but for every product produced outside the city but consumed inside the city. The carbon emissions from clothes, food, cars or anything else produced outside the city don't show up in the Inventory. Without such a calculation, it is impossible to know if Seattle is actually meeting the Kyoto targets.

The City responds, saying that such an analysis is impossible. Former Director of Seattle's Office of Sustainability Mike Mann admitted that they could not do such an accounting, telling KUOW-FM (NPR), "The science is not quite there to do that calculation."¹ There is no question that such an accounting is extremely difficult. This major flaw, however, does not prevent Seattle officials from making claims based on data they admit is flawed and incomplete. So great is the political pressure to show results, they simply fudge the numbers and put political appearances ahead of environmental results.

Ironically, while they claim they cannot count the impact from products shipped into Seattle, they take credit for Seattle's recycling efforts which, they claim, avoids 545,429 metric tons of CO₂ emissions. This represents, they say, "the benefit of avoided materials manufacture" of the next generation of product. So, while they cannot count the emissions produced by consumption of materials in Seattle, they do take credit for emissions avoided in future consumption of materials. Such an accounting trick is like dieters counting calories burned walking to the bakery but not the calories in the cake they ate inside.

Taking Credit for Actions of Others

The second major flaw is that many of the emissions reductions Nickels and Seattle officials do claim are either not their own or are overstated in their significance.

A major area of claimed emissions improvement comes from homes with heating oil. Between 1990 and 2005, emissions were cut in half, and since 2005 emissions fell another 20 percent. These numbers, however, are extremely misleading.

¹ Mike Mann on The Conversation with Ross Reynolds, KUOW, February 11, 2010, <http://www.kuow.org/program.php?id=19411> (Accessed March 14, 2010)

First, as we noted in our audit of City's 2005 emissions inventory, most of this reduction is a result of homeowners switching to low-carbon natural gas heat because it was less expensive. The City simply took credit for the actions of homeowners looking to cut their home heating bills. This doesn't reflect the success of City policies, but the actions of individuals making rational decisions in a free market.

Second, the reductions claimed by the City aren't even the city's. Instead of calculating emissions from homes with oil heat, the City's Emissions Inventory uses the emissions data for all Washington homes with oil heat and then divides by the number of those homes in Seattle. As a result, the City simply piggybacks on reductions made by the state as a whole. It is impossible to know, as a result, whether Seattle's emissions from homes with oil heat are increasing, decreasing or staying the same because there is no Seattle-specific data. With such flawed numbers we cannot determine if the City's policies are having any impact at all or are simply benefitting from emissions reductions elsewhere in the state.

There is some evidence that the City's emissions reductions are not dramatically different than the rest of the state, and may even lag behind in some areas.

While former Mayor Nickels boasts in the City's 2009 Progress Report that "per person, our carbon footprint has shrunk a whopping 20% from 1990 levels,"³ that is not far from the state's total per capita reduction of 12.6% between 1990 and 2007 (2008 numbers are not available for the state). If we adjust the state's numbers to include the nationwide 2.2 percent⁴ emissions reduction in 2008 due to the economic downturn and remove the City's accounting tricks that exaggerate emissions reductions, the City's reductions are comparable to the state as a whole.

In some key areas, the City lags behind the state. City officials note that per capita transportation emissions are falling, saying even though total emissions are up, "Per person transportation emissions, however, have declined 7 percent since 1990."² This reduction, however, lags behind the state. Seattle's transportation emissions fell by 7.3 percent per resident between 1990 and 2008. In comparison, Washington state saw per capita transportation emissions fall 13.3 percent between 1990 and 2007. Adding 2008 would make the gap even larger.

This is a particularly important point because the purpose of the report, in addition to claiming political credit, is to provide support for the policies Seattle officials claim have resulted in this reduction. The numbers show, however, that the policies have not achieved significant results and that transportation emissions are actually increasing.

Policies Don't Match Results

Mayor Nickels' 2009 Progress Report highlights a number of efforts he made to reduce transportation emissions, including "brand new sidewalks; improvements and additions to bike lanes...; bus ridership has increased; and tens of thousands turned out when the Sound Transit light rail officially opened for business."⁵ He also highlights efforts to "Make Seattle Plug-in ready," reduce the City's use of fuel and use of biofuels. The focus on transportation is understandable because

² City of Seattle, "Climate Progress Report: meeting Kyoto and beyond," December 8, 2010, <http://www.seattle.gov/news/detail.asp?ID=10390&Dept=40> (Accessed March 14, 2010)

³ City of Seattle, "Seattle Climate Protection Initiative Progress Report 2009," <http://www.seattle.gov/climate/docs/CPI-09-Progress-Report.pdf> (Accessed March 14, 2010)

⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Emissions of Greenhouse Gases in the United States 2008," December 2009, <ftp://ftp.eia.doe.gov/pub/oiaf/1605/cdrom/pdf/ggrpt/057308.pdf> (Accessed March 14, 2010)

⁵ City of Seattle, "Seattle Climate Protection Initiative Progress Report 2009," <http://www.seattle.gov/climate/docs/CPI-09-Progress-Report.pdf> (Accessed March 14, 2010), p. 3

it is the largest single category of emissions in Seattle. Any serious attempt to cut emissions must address transportation emissions. A quick look at the numbers, however, shows that the City's strategy, which emphasizes forcing lifestyle changes, is failing to curb emissions.

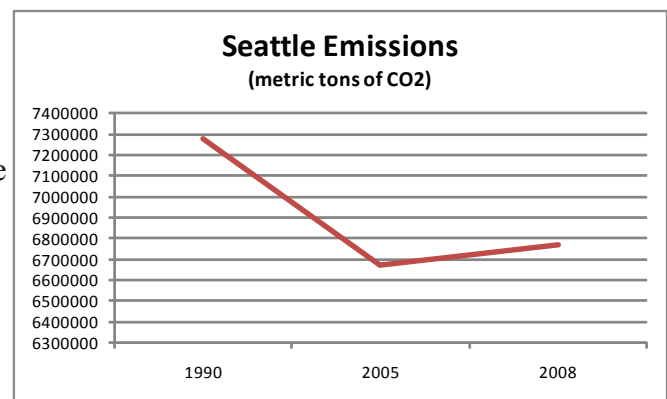
As mentioned above, the City lags behind the state in reducing transportation emissions. In the short time since 2005, when the City began the Climate Initiative, emissions from road vehicles increased 5.5 percent.

These numbers are especially damning given that the City officials have emphasized transportation in their strategy. These numbers are especially stark considering that they come at a time when gas prices rose significantly and an economic downturn reduced vehicle miles traveled statewide.

It may be argued that Nickels is not to blame for these numbers because he was limited in his ability to affect these numbers. That may be true, but it has not prevented him from spending money and claiming credit for anything that can be counted as good news. City leaders must choose between wasting money on efforts that have little impact or cutting their losses and emphasizing environmental areas where they can produce positive results.

Policy Failure

Despite the claims in the Mayor's press releases, Nickels' efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can only be called a failure. Since the Climate Protection Initiative began in 2005, Seattle's carbon emissions have increased, and any increase in the city's carbon emissions after 2008 would leave it above the Kyoto target of 7 percent below 1990 emission levels.



A close look at the data demonstrates the report is more concerned with claiming political credit than with sustainability. Indeed, the report shows the city hitting the 7 percent reduction *exactly* (6,770,000 metric tons of CO2 emitted). It is fortunate that the calculations worked out so neatly.

Given the accounting tricks, however, even that number is suspect. Seattle's accounting moves a significant portion of its emissions off the books (it counts methane emissions from closed landfills inside the city but not from trash shipped outside the city, as it had done for at least a decade). Seattle officials admit they cannot accurately calculate the true carbon footprint of Seattle residents, yet they claim they can determine the success of efforts to reduce that very footprint.

Costs

If Seattle and environmental activists are sincere in their efforts to reduce carbon emissions, these results identify the types of policies that do not work. Unfortunately the numbers are being used to justify the continuation of costly but ineffective policies.

It is not surprising that Mayor Nickels, who staked his reputation on leading nationwide efforts to cut carbon emissions, would claim victory despite the numbers. It is emblematic of the policy inertia, however, that even the Seattle environmental community claimed the numbers as a victory. One reason, undoubtedly, is that they have not taken a close look at the numbers, but simply relied on the press release provided by their traditional political allies.

But it is also clear that the environmental activists, who support many of the City's climate policies, also feel tied to the success of those policies. Data showing the failure of those efforts are a reflection not only on the Mayor but also on those who helped advocate his policies. How else can we explain comments that call the numbers "better than expected," given that the City is on a path to violate the Kyoto targets?

Ignoring the actual results of the 2008 Seattle Community Greenhouse Gas Inventory will have a high cost for taxpayers and the environment. The City Council recently announced its goal to make the city "carbon neutral," although the date for such a goal has not been set. If it simply sticks with its original target of reducing carbon emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050 it will have to cut emissions about two percent *per year*. Considering that the City's emissions increased 1.5 percent between 2005 and 2008, the Mayor and Council cannot afford to continue following ineffective strategies. Such an approach not only wastes taxpayer money today, but requires more dramatic sacrifices down the road.

Unless City leaders and environmental activists are honest about the path the City is on, taxpayers will spend more even as Seattle moves farther from the goal of carbon reductions.