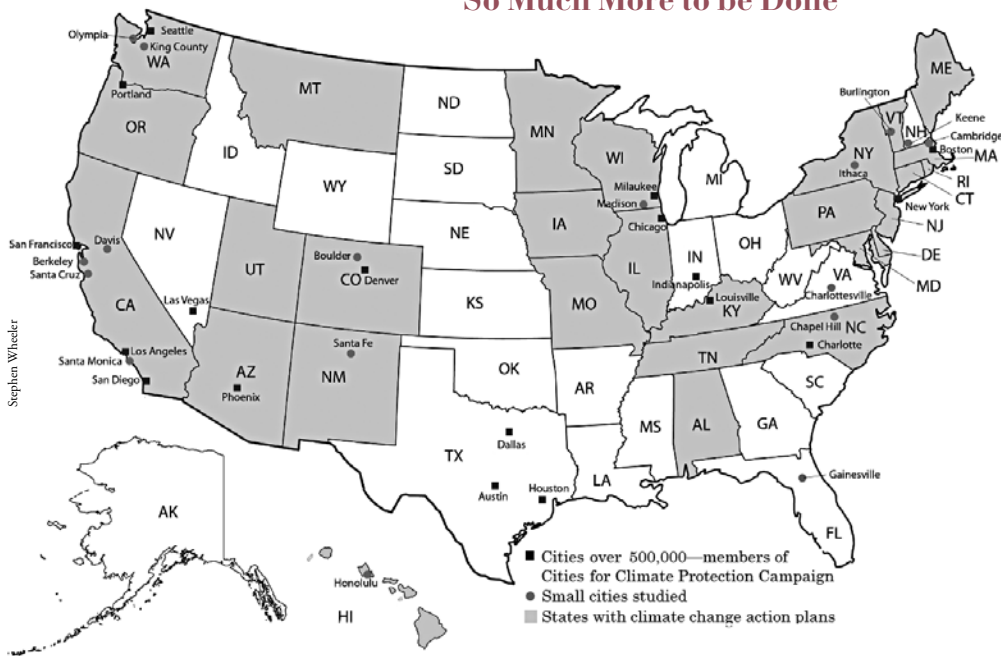
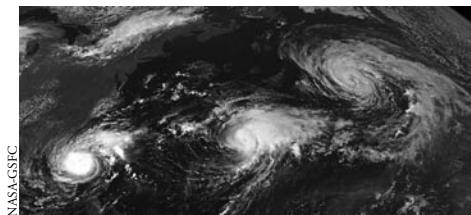


First Look at Climate Action Plans— So Much More to be Done



States and cities with climate action plans reviewed for the JAPA article. Photo shows a first in 2005: Three hurricanes raged across the Atlantic at the same time.



I am not stretching when I say that climate change will be the *defining issue* for urban planners in the 21st century. Planners will be on the front line of climate mitigation and adaptation. Yet, beyond fostering smart growth generally, we are only beginning to define our new roles.

As I write this column, Hurricane Ike is pummeling the Texas coast. News reports on Ike rarely mention the anomaly of three hurricanes in as many weeks threatening the U.S. (the other two being Hanna and Gustav). Nor do they note that climate change may be a contributing factor. This year, while slightly cooler than the last three, will still rank in the top 10 since the instrumental temperature record began. Globally, the eight warmest years in the NASA-Goddard ranking have all occurred since 1998, and the 14 warmest years have all been recorded since 1990.

Long-term ocean warming has raised the baseline of hurricane activity. The year of Katrina, 2005, was the warmest year on record for the planet as a whole. It also saw the most named storms (28), the most hurricanes (15), and the most hurricanes reaching Category 5 strength (Katrina, Rita, and Wilma). Coincidence? Not according to Kerry Emanuel of MIT, whose much-publicized research links the intensity of hurricanes to the warming of surface waters in the North Atlantic.

If you live in Florida, Louisiana, or Texas, these facts might get you thinking about the need for climate action. Likewise, if you live in the western U.S., the record number of large wildfires might give you pause. Or if you live in the Midwest, the number of extreme rainfalls and associated flooding might be a wake-up call. Hard science links all of these natural disasters to our changing climate. And if the climate models are right, natural disasters will become much more frequent in the years ahead.

Against this not-so-rosy backdrop, the *Journal of the American Planning Association* has published a special issue on green communities (Autumn 2008). A theme running through the articles is the need to reduce mankind's carbon footprint. One article in particular caught my eye. Stephen Wheeler of the landscape architecture program at the University of California, Davis, has written about "State and Municipal Climate Change Plans: The First Generation."

Wheeler addresses the big picture: the processes followed in developing climate action plans, the targets set, the implementation mechanisms used, and the measures included or left out. His sampling frame is 29 states with climate plans, the 18 largest U.S. cities, and 17 smaller cities known for planning innovation. After reviewing the plans and interviewing planners,

he concludes that near-term climate reduction goals are set too low, progress toward implementation is too slow, the actions recommended by the plans are inadequate, and public involvement in plan development is limited. Indeed, one could pretty much develop a climate action plan around what is not being done presently.

One caveat about Wheeler's article: The ground is shifting so fast that his review skirts the most important happening of all—California's passage of AB 32, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, and the passage of SB 375, which connects AB 32 implementation to land use and regional development.

California is the state to watch. AB 32 establishes the statewide goal of bringing greenhouse gas emissions down to the 1990 level by 2020. The California Air Resources Board (the agency put in charge) is required to develop a draft scoping plan for meeting the goal (to be finalized by next January). The agency must implement emission reduction measures by 2010, issue enforceable regulations by 2012, and adopt a market-based cap-and-trade system.

SB 375 requires the regional governing bodies in each of the state's major metropolitan areas to adopt, as part of their regional transportation plan, a "sustainable community strategy" that will meet the region's target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. As an incentive to implement sustainable community strategies, the measure would allocate federal transportation funds only to projects that are consistent with the emissions reductions, while allowing those projects to undergo a more streamlined environmental review process.

In its draft scoping plan, CARB has assigned a small but significant reduction in total greenhouse gas emissions—2.3 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year—to smart growth projects. Environmental groups are trying to persuade the board that smart growth can produce much more, at least 10 million metric tons worth of reductions. Whatever the outcome of this give-and-take, urban planners in California are soon to become climate planners.

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