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Western states show the way with climate initiative 6 STATES, 2 PROVINCES SET GOALS TO REDUCE GREENHOUSE GASES

In the battle against global warming, nobody can go it alone.

That's why it was good news last week when California and five other Western states set a regional target for cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The six states, joined by two western Canadian provinces, announced a goal of collectively reducing their emissions to 15 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. It's a major step forward in dealing with the dangers of climate change.

Global warming is truly a global problem requiring global actions. So when six states representing 19 percent of the U.S. population, along with some Canadian neighbors, collaborate on environmental goals and policies, they create a broad strategy that moves everyone one step closer to a global solution.

The target set by the Western Climate Initiative (WCI) links the global warming work going on in the individual partner states and provinces - California, Arizona, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, and Utah plus British Columbia and Manitoba.

For California, the regional target is consistent with the state's goal of reducing emissions 25 percent by 2020 under AB 32, the state's landmark global warming law.

At the heart of the WCI is the creation of a regional "cap-and-trade" market for emissions credits on carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

In such a market-based system, businesses that can reduce emissions more cheaply and more significantly could sell their emissions allowances to companies that are less efficient at or unable to cut emissions. In theory, this market-centered system leads to the most cost-effective reductions.

Scientists suggest that the world by 2050 needs to reduce carbon emissions by a whopping 50 percent to 85 percent from current levels to stave off the dangers from climate change.

So if states collaborate on policies and on creating a broader cap-and-trade market, they can make a bigger difference.

By putting the region under common ground rules, this approach minimizes a problem known as "leakage" - when aggressive emissions cuts in one "clean" state might be offset by emissions increases or lack of progress in another state. When states have similar regulatory environments, utilities would have less incentive to meet emissions reduction goals simply by purchasing "dirtier" electricity from another state, and businesses would have less reason to move to another state with less stringent environmental rules.

Innovations at the state and regional level are crucial in the absence of strong federal actions on global warming. So far, the Bush administration has done nothing to set national limits on greenhouse gases.

But states and regions aren't standing still. Efforts like the WCI should be encouraged to ensure broader participation in solutions to a pressing global problem.