Environment Report: Report Throws Shade on Climate Plan's Impact in Low-Income Communities

The county fire chief wants homeowners to take responsibility for their homes, Western states are close to a drought-sharing deal on the Colorado River and more in our biweekly roundup of environmental news.

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A school bus drives through Barrio Logan. / Photo by Sam Hodgson

The city of San Diego’s Climate Action Plan is supposed to be driving major policy decisions. Soon, it could be the reason why city officials decide to start their own government-run utility to provide electricity to city residents.

That would be a major change, given how San Diego Gas & Electric has, in the past, been able to fend off competition from cities with similar ideas.

But first, let’s recap the CAP, as the Climate Action Plan is known: It was adopted by the City Council in 2015 and calls on San Diego to cut its greenhouse gas emissions in half and also switch to using only renewable power sources to generate electricity by 2035.

The plan has widely been hailed as ambitious, not only because of how large San Diego is but because Republican Mayor Kevin Faulconer backed it during a time when his party is disinterested in doing much about global climate change.

That said, the plan has already faced its share of slings and arrows. Last year, for instance, we reported that the plan’s
goals for how many people would bike to work weren't based on anything and that critics were worried the city wasn't making way for developers to build more homes in the places where useful transit already exists. Until more cars become electric, getting the gasoline-powered ones off the road is a reliable way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The latest critique of the CAP came on Monday, when three groups — the Environmental Health Coalition, Center on Policy Initiatives and SanDiego350 — released an assessment of the plan that says it’s not clear how it’s helping environmental justice communities. (Environmental justice communities is another way of saying “disadvantaged communities,” which is often another way of saying low-income, which is often a way of saying minority.)

The report was supposed to provide a baseline for future reports, but its authors weren't certain about several things, like how much the city was spending in low-income communities because of the Climate Action Plan.

But the report also highlights long-standing inequalities that its authors hope the CAP will address: The lion’s share of areas with the worst air pollution are low-income communities. There are fewer trees in low-income communities than in the rest of the city, on average, which is about more than just aesthetics. Trees suck greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere, and less shade increases the risk of heat deaths. More people in low-income communities rely on public transit.

Since the CAP is supposed to increase the use of public transit, reduce air pollution and cause more trees to be planted, the authors of the report are hopeful they can shape policy that will correct systemic problems here.
“In San Diego, disadvantaged communities are hit first and worst by the harmful impacts of climate change,” Carolina Martinez, policy director at Environmental Health Coalition, said in a statement. “They experience the largest amounts of greenhouse gas emissions and toxic pollution known to cause serious health impacts. With this baseline assessment, we are sending a loud and resounding message to the City of San Diego to start investing here in our communities and start increasing transit options now.”

**County Firefighters May No Longer Protect Certain Empty Homes**

The head of the county’s firefighting operations is warning residents that his teams will not stay to defend an empty home during an oncoming fire if its owners have not taken time to create “defensible space” around the house. Defensible space is basically areas clear of high grass, weeds, “ignitable trees” and firewood, according to the county, which recommends having 100 feet of such space around a home.

In a county press release, County Fire Chief Tony Mecham also said to expect “significant fires” if there are strong Santa Ana winds this year. He said people should no longer rely solely on firefighters’ efforts, because if the winds are blowing hard, even having hundreds of fire engines available will not be enough.

The county also urged people to have an emergency plan to evacuate.

Lately, the county has approved hundreds of new homes in fire-prone areas knowing that the people who buy these