

REGION FORWARD BLOG

COG Board supports multi-state effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation

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Climate change is one of the biggest challenges that the region faces, and greenhouse gases (GHG), such as carbon dioxide, are a major contributor to our changing climate. GHG emissions come from a wide range of sources including power plants and buildings, as well as cars and trucks on the roads. In metropolitan Washington, the transportation sector is contributing a growing share of the region's GHG emissions. Recently, the COG Board of Directors recognized a proposal from the [Transportation and Climate Initiative \(TCI\)](#) as a positive path forward to reducing GHG emissions from transportation.

TCI is a regional collaboration of 12 Mid-Atlantic and Northeast states, including Maryland and Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia, working to reduce GHG emissions from the transportation sector. TCI was formed in 2009 and has worked on areas such as freight analysis, clean vehicles, and sustainable community policies. Together, these thirteen jurisdictions present a considerable opportunity for a collaborative effort to reduce emissions – 72 million people, \$5.3 trillion in gross domestic product, and 52 million registered vehicles.

The COG Board established climate change as one of its focus areas for 2020. As part of this focus, at its February meeting, the COG Board endorsed a [resolution](#) commending the Governors of Maryland and Virginia, and the Mayor of the District of Columbia for their leadership in TCI

and encouraged them to continue participating in developing a program that would set a cap on carbon dioxide emissions from cars and trucks.

Both COG and the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB) began work to address climate change more than a decade ago. In 2008, the COG Board adopted the *National Capital Region Climate Change Report*, and with it, regional greenhouse gas reduction goals: 10 percent below “business as usual” forecasted emissions by 2012, 20 percent below 2005 emission levels by 2020, and 80 percent below 2005 emission levels by 2050. In 2017, COG’s Climate, Energy, and Environment Policy Committee released a report showing that although the region met its greenhouse gas reduction goals for 2012, there needs to be a significant undertaking to meet the 2020 and 2050 goals.

Despite these earlier efforts, the transportation sector’s contribution to the region’s overall greenhouse gas emissions is increasing. At 41 percent of the region’s GHG emissions, transportation is second only to the 52 percent contribution from the built environment sector, which includes residential and commercial buildings. The TPB forecasts transportation sector emissions to decrease by 22 percent from 2015 through 2040, but then increase by two percent from 2040 through 2045. Studies such as the TPB’s “*What Would it Take?*” *Scenario Study* and the collaborative *Multi-Sector Approach to Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions Study* have shown that programs and policies applicable systemwide can provide the most substantial greenhouse reductions from the transportation sector, yet they can be difficult to implement. TCI’s recent proposal might fit the bill.

TCI released a proposal for a cap-and-invest program in December 2019 after a year-long policy design process. The program would set a cap on carbon dioxide emissions from diesel and finished gasoline used by on-road vehicles (e.g. cars and trucks). The emissions cap would decrease over time. Emissions allowances would be auctioned to fuel distributors. The proceeds from the auction would then be available to be invested in projects and programs to further reduce carbon dioxide emissions and provide residents with more sustainable and resilient transportation options. Each participating jurisdiction would decide how it would invest these proceeds. An example of a similar program is the *Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative* (RGGI), which is a program to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from power plants that began in 2009.

TCI will work out the details of the program in the coming months. These details will include determining what the emissions cap will be, how to apportion that cap to the participating jurisdictions, and how to allocate the proceeds to each participating jurisdiction.

TCI is inviting public comments on the draft proposal through February 28, 2020. A final Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is expected to be released in the spring. Each TCI jurisdiction will decide whether to sign the MOU and participate in the program. The program could begin as early as 2022.

COG staff are participating in a group of Councils of Governments and Metropolitan Planning Organizations in the TCI states. The group has met on conference calls and at two in-person convenings, the most recent hosted by COG on January 16, 2020. The purpose of the convenings is to learn more about TCI’s objectives and the policy development process from members of the TCI leadership team, discuss the proposal and accompanying analysis, consider how COGs and MPOs can engage with their membership, offer a thoughtful response to the proposal, and to encourage a robust and equitable program design.

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