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Commission Calls for California to Lead in Climate Change Adaptation

The Little Hoover Commission on Thursday sent a message to the state's leaders: California is beginning to see the initial effects of a warming climate as ongoing efforts by world governments fall short in reducing carbon emissions. Governments statewide must plan now for the impacts of climate change.

A new anticipated environmental reality beginning to envelop California includes a Pacific Ocean rising along 1,100 miles of shoreline, irregular precipitation that includes downpours and drought, higher temperatures, larger, more destructive wildfires and diminishing snowfalls. All suggest eventual damage to property, infrastructure and the natural environment, higher insurance rates, disruption of supply chains and financial insecurity.

"It is already too late to head off impacts of climate change. Even as actions to curb greenhouse gases continue, California must prepare for the inevitable," said Little Hoover Commission Chairman Pedro Nava. "Preparing well will cost far less than rebuilding infrastructure and managing emergencies."

In its report, "*Governing California Through Climate Change*," the Little Hoover Commission calls on the Governor and Legislature to assume the same leadership role in climate change adaptation and risk assessment as it has for addressing greenhouse gases that contribute to a warming atmosphere. "State government in California sets the pace in reducing carbon emissions. The Commission asks the state to exercise the same global leadership in climate adaptation," said Mr. Nava.

During a year-long study, the Commission found encouragement in efforts by state agencies to understand the climate challenge and gauge California's vulnerability. However, "There is not much of a game plan beyond a growing stack of studies and plans," the report states. The Commission found that there is no single-stop administrative structure in place to create statewide climate adaptation policy, overcome institutional barriers and govern the state's response to climate change impacts. Adaptation efforts are scattered throughout the bureaucracies of state government.

The Commission also found that there is no single authoritative source of clear, standardized information to guide decision-making in contentious arenas such as land use and infrastructure investment. Witnesses testifying at three Commission hearings told the Commission that the state has become good at telling people they may be in danger. But it has not been able to define that danger well at the level of four square blocks in a particular city. Local governments need standardized, authoritative and science-based information on which to base decisions. The state, in short, is still largely

unable to tell most Californians what to do about the danger they face.

The Commission believes that organizational change is necessary to make statewide adaptation to climate change more efficient. The status quo is slow-moving, understaffed and inwardly-focused on state agencies. State adaptation efforts also lack adequate scientific expertise and command of the best-available risk assessment methodologies. “Much of California’s future rides on effective preparation and response, both at the state level and at the critical nexus of state and local government,” said Mr. Nava. “The recommendations in this report aim to strengthen the state’s institutional capacity as it addresses the historic governing challenge ahead.”

The Commission calls for the Governor and Legislature to create a new state entity or enhance the capacity of an existing state organization to establish and share the best-available state science and risk assessment procedures for anticipated climate impacts. The Commission envisions this organization becoming the authoritative source for local and regional governments to connect in two-way exchanges with the state for assessment of their climate risks. Critical to the organization’s performance in establishing the best-available information for decision-making will be inclusion of views from local governments, business and the private sector. Models for such an organization already exist within state government.

The Commission also calls for the California Strategic Growth Council to expand its focus beyond emissions reduction to fund stronger climate adaptation in cities, counties and regions. The council’s mission to steer more residential and commercial development to existing urban areas has potential to unwittingly move more people and property into harm’s way. An expanded focus on climate impacts and adaptation will help balance state growth policies with those of climate adaptation.

Finally, the Commission calls for more aggressive enforcement of defensible space requirements to minimize property damage from wildfires, and for the Governor to work with key state agencies to clarify the impact of sea level rise on property rights under California’s Common Law Public Trust doctrine.

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission’s recommendations are submitted to the Governor and the Legislature for their consideration and action. For a copy of the report, visit the Commission’s website: www.lhc.ca.gov.