

# rural new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 37/FEBRUARY 2010

## Community Attitudes Towards a Climate Action Plan (CAP) \*

By **Richard C. Stedman** and **Katherine A. McComas**, Cornell University

### What is the issue?

Climate Action Plans (CAP) have recently emerged in response to concerns about the impact of human behavior on environmental sustainability. Hundreds of U.S. cities have signed on to the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement which strives to meet or beat the Kyoto Protocol targets in their own communities, as well as to urge state and federal governments to enact policies and programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, hundreds of cities around the globe participate in the Cities for Climate Protection program managed by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). One of the program's milestones is to develop a local action plan to reduce emissions. Universities have followed suit, resulting in the University Presidents' Climate Commitment, with over 650 signatories.

Understanding attitudes toward climate change control is an important first step in designing climate action plans at the community, state, or international levels. Public views are diverse and complex. They are based on factors such as the technical nature of the initiatives, the perceived costs and benefits (how much, and for whom), and the process by which involvement is sought. Moreover, it is important to go beyond assessing levels of support and explore why people hold these judgments. Successful implementation includes garnering genuine public enthusiasm, rather than grudging acceptance, so it is critical that policies be judged as responsive and fair. Research on public attitudes helps bring policies and public sentiments into better balance.

### Cornell explores community attitudes

Under the University Presidents' Climate Commitment, Cornell University is developing a climate action plan to reduce the Ithaca campus' greenhouse gas emissions to a net impact of zero. The University is exploring different strategies to provide renewable energy for the campus, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and protect the environment. To examine local community attitudes toward possible strategies, questionnaires were mailed to 2,200 property owners in Tompkins County in the spring of 2009, with an overall response rate of 34% (N=677). Respondents received one of six versions of the questionnaire, each including a different approach that Cornell could pursue to decrease its carbon footprint and increase its energy efficiency. Prior to answering questions on the specific approach, respondents were asked to read a brief description of it, including advantages and disadvantages. These approaches were: bioenergy, wind power, enhanced geothermal systems, urban park-and-ride, carbon offsets, and forest carbon sequestration. These were selected on the basis of (1) their potential impact on the community, (2) their likelihood of occurring during the next 10 years, and (3) their effectiveness in decreasing Cornell's carbon output.

Predictors of opposition or support to the various climate control strategies included:

- (1) **Risk perception:** risk judgments are based on perceived control, the distribution of costs and benefits, and the trust in those managing the risks;
- (2) **Environmental attitudes:** Deeply held values and beliefs underlie overall assessments about environmental issues. Research, has shown that the perceived risk of climate change is less tied to specific beliefs about cause and effect and more tied to fundamental values of environmentalism;
- (3) **Procedural fairness:** The extent to which people view decision making procedures as fair (for example, if they believe they have a "voice" in the process) can influence their support of the outcome;
- (4) **Community and Place:** Several place-specific factors may drive support or opposition. Support in the abstract can easily turn to opposition when the strategy or approach is proposed for one's local neighborhood.

### What was the response?

Respondents generally supported most CAP approaches, but were most positive toward wind power and least favorable toward carbon offsets. Support increased when CAP elements were presented as creating benefits for the community, not only for Cornell. This finding speaks to the importance of having a decision that includes benefits for the communities that are being asked to share some of the costs, broadly construed, of these elements. Attention to a fair decision making process can ensure that community benefits are considered in the design and implementation of the CAP. These findings should not imply, however, that project proponents should attempt to persuade the community of "how fortunate they are" to receive the benefits of a CAP.

Given the importance of providing a "voice" to communities affected by a decision, these findings underscore the need for any organization - community or university - creating a CAP to design a fair process that mindfully and respectfully solicits and incorporates community input in its decisions about implementation. Conducting research on community attitudes can provide the basis for understanding current challenges and opportunities related to potential Climate Action Plan elements, and help inform continued engagement with community members.

\*To view the full summary report, please visit [http://www.sustainablecampus.cornell.edu/climate/process\\_breakout.cfm](http://www.sustainablecampus.cornell.edu/climate/process_breakout.cfm)  
For more information on Cornell's Climate Action Plan, visit <http://www.sustainablecampus.cornell.edu/climate/>



Cornell University

The **Rural New York Minute** is a publication of Cornell University's Community & Rural Development Institute (CaRDI), edited by Robin M. Blakely. These publications are free for public reproduction with proper accreditation. For more information on CaRDI, our program areas, and past publications, please visit: [www.cardi.cornell.edu](http://www.cardi.cornell.edu). Cornell University is an equal opportunity affirmative action educator and employer.