CASCADIA TIMES
INVESTIGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM FROM THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST SINCE 1995

Global Warming and the CRC

TOPICS: Air Pollution Air Toxics Chevron Chromium VI Climate Change DEQ Environmental Justice EPA Esco Freeway Global Warming Greenwashing I-5 Interstate 5 Pollution Portland The Oregonian Traffic

POSTED BY: PAUL.KOBERSTEIN APRIL 2, 2011

Which road to take? The CRC project will encourage people to drive more, making it more difficult for Oregon to meet its already daunting greenhouse gas goals that were established by the Legislature in 2007, If so, the CRC may be on the wrong road. (Cascadia Times graphic based on data provided by Angus Duncan.)

This is part 7 of Cascadia Times' continuing series on the Columbia River Crossing and air pollution. Read the series **introduction**, and articles on **induced traffic**, **lagging traffic counts**, **the cancer in Portland's air**, **an environmental injustice**, **ESCO and industrial air pollution, global warming and the CRC, a look to the future, and the media's role.**

You can download **maps of Portland's toxic air**

One of the most important questions connected to the Columbia River Crossing is how it will impact climate

CASCADIA TIMES FACEBOOK

Cascadia Times Facebook

CATEGORIES

Air Pollution
Animal Abuse
Climate
Environmental Justice
Film
Forests
GMOs/Pesticides
Journalism
Kathie Durbin
Mining
Nature in the City

change. Traffic is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions that are forcing global temperatures to rise.

Nevertheless, the CRC's supporters say their project will be good for the planet. "The greenest bridge ever," is how Gail Achterman, chair of the Oregon Transportation Commission, described it in January 2009 remarks to the Portland City Council.

While Achterman says she is "absolutely committed to combating global climate change by reducing emissions from the transportation sector," she believes the criticisms "are misplaced."

"This project performs well even when viewed through the climate change lens," she says.
How does she figure?

The state highway departments of Oregon and Washington, which are the chief sponsors of the CRC, say that without their project, "the highway crossing would produce 40 percent more greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 than under existing conditions."

In other words, the CRC claims its project would reduce greenhouse gas emissions substantially and would therefore be good for the planet.

But, as they say, the devil is in the details.
"A transportation project of this size should make a significant contribution to addressing climate change," says Mara Gross, policy director of the Coalition for a Livable Future, a Portland group.

"Instead, the highway departments acknowledge that greenhouse gas emissions in the CRC corridor will increase by 32 percent if this project is built."

Nuclear Power

Politics

Rivers

Transportation

Uncategorized

Water Pollution

"The highway departments have made light of the increase in greenhouse gas emissions by overestimating traffic if the freeway is not expanded and by measuring the highway expansion against doing nothing, which no one is proposing," she says.

"As part of implementing their plan to address climate change, the state of Washington established benchmarks to decrease vehicle travel by 35 percent by 2035. Yet on the CRC they're planning for a 40 percent increase in vehicle travel by 2030."

Both Oregon and Washington have passed laws that set goals for reducing greenhouse gas levels. By 2020. Washington seeks to reduce greenhouse gas levels to concentrations seen in 1990, while Oregon wants a 10 percent reduction beyond that. In addition, Washington seeks a 50 percent reduction beneath 1990 levels by 2050, while Oregon wants a 75 percent reduction beneath 1990 levels by 2050.

The Oregon Global Warming Commission, established by the Legislature in 2007, recently published an "Interim Roadmap" spelling out how the state could meet its goals.

Meeting those goals "will be very difficult to do," says Angus Duncan, the commission's chairman.

For example, the roadmap says the Portland region will have to institute tough controls on growth, such as prohibiting any expansion of its Urban Growth Boundary for 40 years.

The transportation sector of the economy accounts for an estimated 38 percent of Oregon's carbon dioxide emissions, with vehicle emissions predicted to increase by 33 percent by 2025 because of increased driving.

If historic and recent transportation trends continue, the CRC expects that carbon emissions will continue to increase. By 2030, carbon emitted from vehicles on all regional roadways, including I-5 and I-205, will increase over existing conditions. From its analysis, not only is it

unclear where the greenhouse gas reductions called for in state global warming will come from, but the CRC increases the odds that they won't be achieved at all.

If the CRC's expectation that its project will benefit climate change comes true, it could play a role in helping to meet those goals. But the critical assumptions behind this claim are being questioned by environmentalists and economists alike, casting doubts about the CRC'S cheery greenhouse gas prognosis.

The CRC assumes, for example, that currently, 135,000 vehicles cross the river on I-5 each weekday. However, the Interstate Bridge has never averaged that much traffic for an entire year – ever.

The all-time record for average weekday traffic in any single year was 132,603, in 2005, according to the Oregon Department of Transportation.

Average weekday traffic has averaged more than 135,000 on the bridge during only eight months since 2005, and not once since 2007. Since 2005, traffic on the bridge is down 6,000 cars a day, a drop of 4 percent.

The CRC's forecasts anticipated that people would be driving more after 2005, not less. Actual traffic counts fell short of the CRC's forecasts by about 17,000 cars per day in 2010.

Such a decline would cripple the CRC's ability, through the collection of tolls, to pay off construction debt incurred by with the project.

Critics of the projecr say the decline throws into question whether the bridge is actually needed. The decline is also good news, as it is resulting in smaller greenhouse gas emissions.

A second critical assumption under question is the CRC's assertion that the "No-Build" conditions will not feature tolls, light rail and other things that the two states could

do or are already planning to do to reduce traffic and greenhouse gases.

The CRC's greenhouse gas emissions look good in comparison with this "No-Build" scenario, which has been derided as having no relevance to real world conditions. It was concocted for the sole purpose of meeting the narrow requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

In its public statements, the CRC also uses the comparison to make its project look good to environmentally.

But the environmentalists like Mara Gross have easily seen through the CRC's transparent attempt to mislead the public in its press announcements.

The fatal flaw of the No-Build scenario is its assumption that, in the event that no replacement bridge is built, nothing new would be done to reduce traffic demand, such as implement a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) program that encourages the use of travel options.

"TDM is a quick, inexpensive approach to reducing the number and length of drive-alone trips," Oregon's interim greenhouse gas roadmap says.

"Nationwide, agencies have been successful at reducing drive-alone trips by adopting demand reduction targets, then implementing community appropriate strategies to achieve the target," the roadmap says.

The Oregon roadmap says an effective TDM program could include the following measures:

•Reward agencies that meet the greenhouse gas targets.

•Develop and market a new ridesharing program for personal and commercial car sharing.

Involve private experts in its development. Offer incentives for participation.

•Develop and implement TDM programs for large new transportation construction projects (such as the CRC.) State and local agencies and employers would provide information and incentives to help people carpool, vanpool, use transit, walk, bicycle and telecommute. Similar programs have reduced drive-alone trips 8 to 13 percent.

•Provide baseline funding for TDM programs in jurisdictions with major employers and ongoing congestion programs, similar to the state of Washington's successful Commute Trip Reduction program.

In other words, a TDM program could achieve significant reductions in greenhouse gases at little cost.

But in the CRC's fantasy world, none of these things would be done under the "No-Build" scenario, a fact that renders any comparison between the project and real world conditions meaningless.

The No-Build Alternative is called the "fictional alternative" because the odds that it would happen are very small.

The bottom line is that the CRC compares its proposal with an alternative that is based on traffic projections that already been shown by actual data to be flawed. The alternative also fails to include traffic reduction measures that will surely be needed if Oregon and Washington are to have any chance of meeting their global warming goals.

In high school, the kids know this as the fallacious "straw man" argument which they are taught to reject as illogical. Adults might recognize it as a variant of the straw man argument with a different name: greenwashing.

Greenwashing is a term describing the deceptive use of green PR or green marketing in order to spin a misleading perception that a company's policies or products are environmentally friendly.

The company, in this case, is the CRC. It has placed a green label onto its products — a megabridge and expanded freeway — to evoke positive environmental feelings from people who visit the home page of its web site, as the bicycles in its logo on the opposite page convey. It's like putting the image of a forest on a bottle of pesticides.

Environmentalists often use the term greenwashing to describe the actions of energy companies, which are traditionally the largest polluters. The CRC can be viewed as an energy company. Although it would be unfair to say that Chevron and Shell and BP are its business partners, they are all in the business of vehicle transportation.

After the CRC is completed, it projects to see 50,000 more cars crossing the river on Interstate 5 in 2030 — an increase from the current 125,000 cars per day to a projected 177,000.

Studies cited on Page 5 of this report say that the new road will cause some of this added traffic. An increase in jobs and population will also increase traffic. So will the fulfillment of unmet demand for access to an uncongested I-5 bridge.

With a new bridge available, some home builders who want to develop rural lands in Clark County will be aided by a "grandfather" clause in Washington's zoning code that allows them to build on rural land regardless of current zoning, if allowed under prior zoning codes. That will cause sprawl, and sprawl leads to more traffic.

Metro calculates that sprawl in Clark County will increase traffic by 1 percent, or about 2,000 cars per day, by 2030. That number would be cut in half if the freeway charges a toll.

Another wrinkle is a proposal by the Cowlitz Indian Tribe to build a new casino in La Center, a hair north of Clark County. A new casino will cause new traffic.

All of this new traffic will add up to more greenhouse gas emissions, a fact that will require aggressive actions at separating people from their cars if the CRC is to help meet state global warming goals. One way to do that is to increase tolls.

However, there is a danger that tolling may be too successful at reducing traffic, raising the possibility that insufficient tolling funds would be generated to pay construction debt.

If the bridge isn't built, there would be no reason not to increase tolling charges for the purpose of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and toxic air pollution.

For a description of how TDM actions would work, just ask Lenny Anderson, manager of the Swan Island Transportation Management Association, who has managed programs designed to reduce traffic.

In 1997 the Oregon and Washington Departments of Transportation announced that the northbound span of the I-5 Bridge would be closing for up to three weeks in order to repair the lift mechanism.

The states used TDM to reduce trips across the bridge, and enjoyed "breathtaking" success, Anderson says. "There was no traffic congestion across the bridge despite a reduced number of lanes," he says.

At the time Anderson was transportation manager for Boise Cascade on Swan Island.

He had to find alternatives to the single-occupancy vehicles that one-third of the Boise Cascade workforce drove from Clark County.

C-Tran, Clark County's transit agency, offered free van rides for groups of 10 or more. Boise Cascade partnered

with other Swan Island businesses and got free C-Tran bus service. Commuter rail was set up between the Vancouver Amtrak station and Union Station in Portland.

"The '97 I-5 bridge closure was a dramatic demonstration of what TDM can do when we really try," Anderson says. "Sadly, since then almost every agency action by both Clark county and Metro has gone the other way. A valuable lesson appears to have been lost."

Alternatives to the CRC project "have been repeatedly pushed off the table," Anderson says.

"Why isn't this a model for solving our regional transportation challenges?" he asks. That's a good question that the CRC has yet to answer.

"And what is the saddest part of this record of failure? The CRC's Big Bridge will undo in a day what we have been able to accomplish in 10 years on Swan Island."

The CRC deserves credit for being the first major transportation project in the country to include a global warming analysis in its environmental analysis, even though there was no rule or law saying it had to one. It won a national award for that accomplishment from the National Association of Environmental Professionals.

The award honors the project's approach to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change evaluation in its May 2008 Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

But notice what the CRC didn't win it for: investing in strategies that reduce vehicle miles traveled and avoiding options that induce demand.

This article was made possible by the generous support of our readers. Please make a donation to support Cascadia Times' investigative journalism today!