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Introductory Remarks: California's Future and What Does the Environment Look Like?

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Introductory Remarks

California's Future and What Does the Environment Look Like?

Ken Alex*

It is very nice to be here this morning. It is a topic as you just heard near and dear to my heart. When I first started at the office of Planning and Research when Jerry Brown became governor, we asked how do we talk about California's future and what does the environment look like? I thought that a catchy way to think about it and talk about it is—California with 50 million people. Right now we have about 38 million. We are inexorably heading to 50 million. There are changing estimates about when we will be there, but it will not be terribly long.

Of course at least from my perspective, the overriding issue as we move to a larger population is climate change. You combine an increasing population and stress on all kinds of resources, in the midst of a changing climate, and we have perhaps a precursor right now with drought. Just as we have with water scarcity, with climate, we have a series of different approaches and different thoughts about how the state might go forward. It is a profound set of issues and a profound set of problems which we confront with a growing population and a growing need to have some ability to deal with scarcity.

What I thought I would do just by way of setting the stage for the various panels today is really to talk about some solutions. It is a funny place to start, but one of the things that I worry about with the climate change situation is that we're constantly talking about gloom and doom. It becomes hard to understand how we might find a way out of it. I thought I'd start out today talking about some of the solutions that we're working on, that we're thinking about, that we're making some progress with and I think it will dovetail pretty nicely with some of the topics for the rest of the day.

I am happy to say here in California, we're on the cutting edge of a lot of change and ways to attack the problems of climate change and in thinking about how we handle our natural resources in a state that often leads the country and the world. Hopefully that's the case as we go forward here now.

Let me start with the very noncontroversial concept of high-speed rail. I know it's a bit of a topic here in the Central Valley. I'll say one thing that I've probably learned most since I've been at the Office of Planning and Research, is how important the Central Valley is to the state's future. I grew up in Southern

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2014 / California's Future and what Does the Environment Look Like?

California near the coast. I've lived much of my life in Northern California near the coast. I think a lot of the people who live on the coast are guilty of not thinking much about the Central Valley and how they get things like food on their table and all the things that the Central Valley provides.

When Governor Brown was Attorney General one day he asked, "Well, what do you think about high-speed rail?" I hadn't given it much thought and I was pretty ambivalent about it but he wanted me to look into it and give him my unvarnished opinion about it. I started doing that and I will say overtime I have become more and more convinced of the really profound importance of having a high speed rail for the future of California.

The way that I like to think about it, may be somewhat different than how you think about it or how you've heard about it. First of all, I want to suggest that we think about what California looks like without high-speed rail. There are a couple of things that are particularly of note. One is people move north to south so we have to have a way to do that. As the population grows, there'll be more demand for movement north and south, south and north. Unfortunately right now we have a huge amount of short haul air traffic that's fairly inefficient. If you think about having more population and more commerce going north to south, south to north, you're going to have to have more airports and more air traffic.

The estimate right now is that if you expanded the airports to the point needed, it would cost about 150 billion dollars. You can well imagine the land use issues around doing airport expansion.

Just on the basic people moving concept, it's hugely important to have some alternatives. In Spain, between Madrid and Barcelona, they reduced air traffic by having high speed rail, which is about the same distance that we're talking about between south and north here, by about 50%. That's the basic argument, but we can also think of it in a different way. Right now the projections are that most of the population growth in California will be in the Central Valley. The Central Valley is the least connected economically to the rest of the state. It's overall the poorer region of the state. If we don't connect it in an intelligent way then we're going to isolate further the Central Valley. If you think about how commerce is done and the relationship of places like Silicon Valley to the Central Valley, right now it's pretty minimal.

The other point is how we grow in the Central Valley. Well, right now we're growing around the edges of urban areas. Fresno is a perfect example. In Fresno, the areas right around the urban border of the City of Fresno that are some of the best agricultural lands in the world. There's a huge amount of pressure to convert those lands to urban landscape in part because there are very low densities for housing in the Central Valley.

One way to think about high-speed rail is as an organizing principle for how the Central Valley grows. If we spend some time and do planning around high speed rail stations instead of building parking lots around these stations, we can think about building connected public transit and other types of transit that allow

people from different areas to get to high-speed rail stations. We can also build transit-oriented development around the rail stations.

Fresno again is a good example. The City of Madera is about thirty-five miles away. It's a very depressed town, if you've been there. I was there not too long ago. I was kind of shocked and it needs help. One way to help it would be to have a direct connection between Fresno and Madera that also link to transit that can get you to the Bay Area in an hour. That would change the relationship of the Central Valley.

The other thing high-speed rail does, if we have connectivity and we do some serious planning, we can also think about preserving open space and preserving agricultural land by having higher densities in urban areas. There will be a fair amount of consistency to a lot of the themes that you're going to hear about today. High-speed rail is sort of the backbone of a lot of that, particularly in the Central Valley. I now have become a big advocate for high-speed rail and I hope we're able to move forward with it starting very significantly this year.

The next thing I want to talk about is, as we move to deal with climate change, we have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by about 80% below 1990 levels. That's a whole other topic but it is also about how California moves forward. As we have a growing population, we'll need additional energy resources. If you think about dealing with climate change and how we get an 80% reduction of all greenhouse gas emissions, you also need to think about reducing emissions from the transportation sector, which makes it about 40% of greenhouse gas emissions in California. The way you do that is to convert transportation to electricity. Instead of running off of fossil fuels, we run off of electricity generated by renewables. We have to do that in a fairly short order.

How do we get that renewable energy? Right now it's a very large set of land use conflicts. It's creating ripples in the environmental community because the environmental community spent decades preserving places in the Mohave Desert and other places that are now the best places in the world to get things like solar energy. Renewable energy right now takes a very substantial amount of land.

Are there some other ways to think about this? Well, one area that we're giving a fair amount of thought to is agricultural land in the Central Valley, particularly in the western San Joaquin. How can we best use those lands and what's the relationship to water rights? There are lands in the Central Valley that have strong claims to water but may not be the best places for farming. They may not be the prime agricultural locations in the state. Those are lands for which I used guardedly the term "degraded." The agricultural community doesn't necessarily like that word but I haven't come up with another one yet. I'm open to suggestion.

In what I call degraded lands, we can start to think about how we might build some significant amount of renewable energy. The agricultural community can then have a stronger focus on the prime lands that they want to ensure are preserved. A hundred years ago agriculture in California was very different. We grew different types of crops. A hundred years from now climate change or no,

2014 / California's Future and what Does the Environment Look Like?

we will probably grow different types of crops in California. One of the great things about prime agricultural land is that it can support agriculture of a different type over time. It becomes very important in a climate change-constrained world that we pay attention to the very best agricultural land and that we preserve it. By the way, agricultural land tends to be some of the best recharge areas for ground water in the state, another reason not to pave over it.

All of these issues overlap, and we need to figure out from a more intelligent place how do we make decisions about what land we preserve for agriculture. What land do we provide for renewable energy? And what lands are best for urban build out and housing? There's something called the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan that has been in the works for a number of years. Hopefully that will be out on the street for you to have some final exams about. It will have to be next semester I think the way it's going right now. We're also working on another convening around land in the Central Valley issues along some of these similar lines.

Let me talk about just one more area and then I'll give you a chance to ask questions if you want. One of the biggest things that my office, the Office of Planning and Research, is working on is guidance for general plans. The Office of Planning and Research has a number of statutory obligations, one of which is to put out guidelines for general plans. We also put out guidelines for CEQA but that's a whole other discussion that we don't want to do and I personally really don't want to do. I probably did not think about general plans and their importance before I came to OPR although we did some litigation around what needs to be in general plans around climate change.

Now, having been at OPR for the past few years, as with high-speed rail, I've come to learn that general plans are hugely important for the future of the state. Every jurisdiction, of which there are over 400 in California between cities and counties, they're supposed to do a general plan and they're supposed to keep it fairly updated—that has not always been the case. Currently the city and county of Los Angeles, each of them have general plans that are thirty-eight years old. The last I looked, the LA basin has changed a bit in the last thirty-eight years.

We're trying to figure out ways to change how general plans, which are sometimes called the constitution of the local government, how they're going to grow, how they're going to develop, how do we make the more viable, vibrant, living, alive, up to date. We're spending a lot of time radically changing how we think general plans should be done. We're moving to a model to do it online. Part of the reason local governments have not been doing this is it's very expensive. They're time consuming, they're expensive, and they're difficult.

We're very interested in making it cheaper and easier and much more usable. We're going to provide to local governments a very substantial amount of data in conjunction with mapping tools that they will be able to access online for free, as will the public. That will have a pretty significant effect on how we think about planning and how planning is done if the public and the decision makers have the

ability to draw maps and look at land and land use at a parcel level on a pretty much immediate basis.

We're doing a lot of work on making data much more accessible to the public and to local governments and to do it in a free and transparent manner. We're also trying to make available what I call scenario modeling tools, which allow decision makers and again hopefully the public as well to try different scenarios to say, "Okay. What if we change densities? What if we change locations? What if we change land use designations? How does this affect outcomes?" When I say outcomes, I'm thinking pretty broadly. How does it affect things like health impacts? You have a different set of outcomes if you have a community that is based more on bicycling and walking than simply relying on car travel. You have a different set of outcomes for a crime and a different set of outcomes potentially for revenue for the city based on different densities and different development patterns.

We're trying to make all of these available, to make it available online and to make it free or very inexpensive if we possibly can and to integrate climate change and climate issues into all of the various documents and things that we're making available online. We're going to try to roll this out probably in the fall. We're making a lot of progress with it and if you're interested in this area of law, I think it's going to be a pretty big change that we'll once again probably start in California and move east. That's certainly our hope.

As part of all these, McGeorge Professor Leslie Jacobs mentioned that we're working on something called The Environmental Goals and Policy Report, which is this whole little inside government concept. There's a statutory requirement that OPR do one of these Environmental Goals and Policy Reports every four years. Like a lot of environmental related statutes and requirements, this was signed into law by Ronald Reagan when he was governor. Since Ronald Reagan signed that into law, the EGPR as we call it, has been done once. That was in 1978. You can see the government is following the law to the tee.

When I became OPR Director, I thought we should actually do one of these. The 1978 edition is fascinating. It was done by Governor Brown and it's called the Urban Strategy. About 90% of it is relevant today, which suggests both some level of prescience and some level of dismal failure. We're still talking about many of the same issues in many of the same ways but hopefully we have some new tools to move forward. One piece of what we're doing with the Environmental Goals and Policy Report is to identify all kinds of measures, ways to think about environmental progress in the state and to do them across traditional and non-traditional ways of thinking about environmental health and progress.

We'll pick out about twenty that we think are the most important and then if you want to dig deeper, we'll have available perhaps hundreds of different ways to think about environmental progress. We'll make those available on the OPR website and hopefully overtime we'll be able to think about where we made progress and where we haven't.

2014 / California's Future and what Does the Environment Look Like?

These are profound and very difficult issues that we confront as a state as we move into the century. We deal with climate change. We deal with very difficult issues of resource scarcity and we grow. We have to confront these in meaningful ways. I really appreciate having the chance to come talk to you all about it and to be part of this seminar.