

PASSING THE BUCK: MONEY, LEADERSHIP, AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADAPTATION TO SEA-LEVEL RISE

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INTRODUCTION

Common discourse about adaptation to the impacts of climate change in developed nations tends to simply state (or assume) that rich countries like the US can cope without major challenges due to the enormous economic and technological resources, social and political stability, and functional governance structures and strong management institutions already in place. While Hurricane Katrina has opened up some important questions about this conventional wisdom, to date there has been rather little serious empirical examination of the ground-level reality of adaptation in rich countries like the U.S. Is it actually true that we will be able to deal with faster sea-level rise, increasing coastal hazards, growing water quality issues, and greater pressures on coastal ecosystems without major problems? These questions add urgency to the recommendations and forward-looking thinking of the two recent U.S. ocean commissions, which asked whether the coast in 50 years from now – after decades of more crisis- and development-driven management – will still be the coast that provides the riches we now enjoy, attracts the crowds, and harbors the countless irreplaceable ecological treasures we all enjoy.

This paper takes a closer look at this ground-level reality of adaptation, including the current level of preparedness, and any efforts underway in the state of California to plan for and deal with the impacts of climate change in coastal areas.

METHODOLOGY

To examine adaptation activities in California, we integrated findings from a comprehensive survey of nearly 300 local coastal managers from municipal and county governments in California (conducted in the second half of 2006) with the findings from 18 in-depth interviews with regional, state, and federal managers (conducted in early 2006), as well as other data on the coastal management situation in that state. The survey and interviews asked about current management challenges and any efforts to prepare for the growing risks and impacts associated with climate change and sea-level rise. We also examined barriers to action, needs for information, assistance, leadership, guidance, and available resources to take on adaptation to these global change challenges. By identifying and comparing the opinions and attitudes of managers at different levels of governance we try to highlight some of the key challenges coastal managers face in addressing climate change risks.

SELECTED FINDINGS

While awareness and concern about global warming is generally high among coastal managers in California, their in-depth knowledge of potential impacts is only moderate. And while a majority is ready to act on climate change, only a very small number of cities and counties have actually begun to seriously look at the impacts of climate change, including in coastal regions. Local governments explain this lack of action with a number of perceived hurdles (see Figure 1).

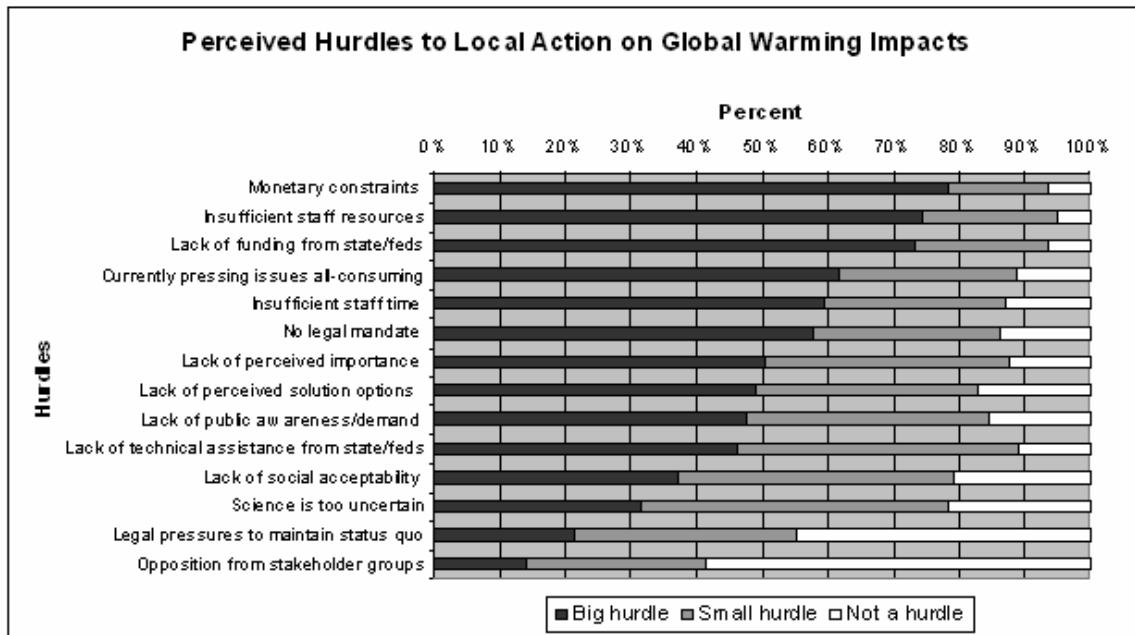


Figure 1: Perceived Hurdles to Local Action on Global Warming Impacts

Being overwhelmed and understaffed to deal with current problems, leaves managers with little room to get informed about, much less begin addressing the growing risks related to climate change and sea-level rise. Such constraints do not even allow them to find out that many of the expected impacts from global warming are not “new” and “extra” or “different” but mostly more severe versions of what they are already intimately familiar with.

While some important new institutional and legislative activities have emerged (even after the survey and interviews), coastal managers from higher levels of governance that we interviewed report similar challenges to those of their local counterparts. In addition, they point to lack of interest or pressure from the local level, development pressures, a fear to open up existing coastal legislation, state budget constraints, and distraction with other legislative priorities. In fact, few state agencies have begun to plan or account for accelerating sea-level rise or other climate changes in their own operations, planning activities, or other management responsibilities.

These findings raise interesting questions about whose responsibility it is to begin thinking about adaptation. The political economy underlying coastal development and

management produces challenging political constellations that may hinder or at least constrain or delay preparing for climate change impacts.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that the confidence in developed nations' ability to deal with the impacts of climate change in coastal regions may be overstated. In addition, they raise difficult, and in some cases virtually "taboo," questions that must be addressed if coastal California, and coastal America more generally, wants to continue to enjoy the bounty and beauty of its dynamic coastal edge, while ensuring the safety of a growing population at increasing risk from harm.

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