A Strategic Approach to the Climate Crisis: Lessons from Vermont

Summary: The climate crisis is a moving target involving the dynamic and complex interaction of not only geophysical factors (those related to the processes and properties of the physical Earth) but also political, economic, technological, and cultural as well, with all of these systems interacting in both predictable and unpredictable ways. A strategic approach to combating the climate crisis that considers this evolving confluence of physical and societal factors should include periodic reassessment, recalibration, and retooling. The recent passing of H. 289 in Vermont is an informative example of this strategy.

Wind Turbines in the Green Mountains (Photo by Renewable Energy Vermont)

The Climate Crisis: An Ever-Evolving Landscape

The climate crisis is a moving target.

This is true not only because the climate is changing, but because the natural and human reactions and responses to climate change are themselves evolving!

On the geophysical side of the equation – having to do with the physical processes and properties of the Earth itself – climate change is spawning adjustments in other aspects of our physical world. For instance, climate change is redirecting (and maybe even destroying) major ocean currents, and destroying or irrevocably altering plant and animal habitats.

These geophysical changes, in turn, trigger human responses in virtually all aspects of human existence, including the political, economic, technological, and even cultural spheres. For example, climate change has precipitated technological innovations, advances in scientific research, a roiling political environment, and dynamic economic incentives and disincentives that emerge over time.

To make matters even more complex, all of these physical and societal systems interact in both predictable and unpredictable ways.

A Strategic Pivot: Reassess, Recalibrate, and Retool

Much of the response to climate change has been ad hoc, leading to a series of dislocated, transient, and inefficient "solutions." Meanwhile, the crisis continues to evolve in complexity and scope.

This is not to say that there has been no progress. But much of this progress has been lost in the ever-changing landscape of the problems we face, requiring a vastly more strategic and cooperative set of responses.

We need some effective strategic maneuvers to help us hit this moving target more successfully. One relatively straightforward strategic approach is to periodically pivot in the midst of this systemic dynamism. Specifically, we must face the changing landscape by routinely reassessing, recalibrating, and retoolingour responses.

A Case in Point: Vermont's Renewable Energy Standards

Ben Edgerly Walsh, a Climate and Energy Advocate of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG), recently reported in an email to VPIRG followers that,

"On a vote of 9-1, the House Environment and Energy Committee voted to pass H.289, a bill years in the making that would nearly quadruple the amount of new renewable energy Vermont electric utilities are required to deliver to their customers in the next decade, and get Vermont to 100% renewable electricity." (Email to VPIRG followers, February 7, 2024. See also an update on the Renewable Energy Vermont webpage)

Walsh describes the process Vermont's legislature took to overhaul its aging Renewable Energy Standards.

Going into this legislative session, a working group of legislators and stakeholders (myself included) had spent months working towards an approach to overhauling Vermont's renewable

energy requirements that both dramatically increases the pace at which Vermont's utilities are getting renewable energy built, and does so in a way that advances the affordability and reliability of Vermont's electric system. (emphasis, his)

This process thoroughly reassessedthe consequences of the original renewable energy standards over the past decade. From that reassessment, the group recalibrated their expectations for achieving 100% renewable electricity in Vermont, calling for a "dramatic" acceleration of the pace of building Vermont's renewable energy system by public utilities. These discussions eventually led to a major legislative retoolingof the effort to combat the climate crises, namely, H. 289.

H. 289 aims to get Vermont to 100% renewable electricity in the next decade, cutting carbon emissions the equivalent of "taking at least 160,000 cars off the road, for good."

So, what exactly does this bill do? As Walsh described in his report, the bill, in part

> 1. doubles the amount of new renewables Vermont utilities are required to get built here in Vermont – in particular small and medium-sized renewables – from 10% to 20% of the electricity delivered by a given utility. We expect this to be met mostly with new solar power.
>
> 2. creates a new requirement for Vermont utilities to provide their customers with additional new renewable energy of any size from anywhere in the region (inside or outside Vermont). This requirement is over and above the in-state requirement described above - an additional 20% no later than 2035 for Green Mountain Power, and an additional 10% by 2035 for Vermont's other electric utilities.
>
> 3. requires all Vermont utilities to provide 100% renewable electricity to their customers – by 2030 for Green Mountain Power and Vermont Electric Coop and by 2035 for other utilities that are not already at 100% renewable.
>
> 4. requires, starting in 2025, that the … utilities that have already voluntarily achieved 100% renewable …meet most of their new electric load (as their customers adopt more EVs, heat pumps, etc.) with new renewables.

Lessons are Learned: The Saga of Virtual Net Metering (VNM) in Vermont

As the climate changes and humanity responds to these changes, we must be prepared to be surprised by the effectiveness of some actions and disappointed by the failure of others.

For instance, earlier legislation in Vermont embraced "virtual" net metering (VNM), a policy that allows consumers who generate their own electricity from renewable sources, such as solar panels or wind turbines, to offset the cost of electricity they consume from the grid. VNM promised that it would help promote the adoption of renewable energy by making it financially viable for more consumers and encouraging the development of renewable energy projects.

However, this experiment has failed to achieve its intended results in Vermont. Having reassessed the viability of VNM in Vermont, the Committee recalibrated its expectations, deciding to phase out the program. It is important to note that this bill leaves the step of retooling economic incentives for consumers to future legislation or new non-governmental incentives.

Regardless of whether H. 298 becomes law in Vermont, this process is an excellent example of making a pivot in the face of the ever-evolving climate crisis by reassessing, recalibrating and retooling.

[To follow this process, check out https://www.revermont.org/]

---

by Russell E. Willis

If I can help you, your business, or your organization with copywriting (white papers, blogs, web content, case studies, or emails); Ghostwriting (Books and articles -- specializing in converting blog and podcast series into print or ebooks, or short-form "explainer" videos, please check out REWillisWrites.com (and fill out the contact form) or email me at rewilliswrites@gmail.com.

I am also available for strategic planning consultations for not-for-profit organizations and creatives. Contact me at REWillisWrites@gmail.com for more information.