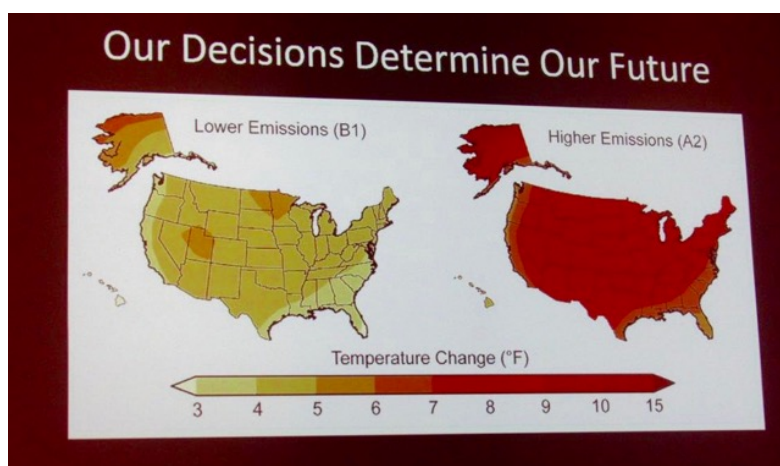


Calif. leads charge to combat climate change

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – Everybody talks about the weather. And few can accurately analyze it – especially when we speak of the climate, which is technically the statistics of weather.

But that's just what many tried to do Thursday morning at Harveys as Operation Sierra Storm wrapped up amid an unprecedented series of storms that knocked out power, closed roads and buried residents with water and snow.



Making the case for the reality of climate change. Photo/Denise Haerr

The annual climate conference brought out more than 30 stakeholders and weather enthusiasts to hear preeminent climate expert Richard Somerville of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and California state Senate President Pro-tem Kevin de Leon.

For the first time, the Weather Channel sent three crews to cover the events – which seemed to take place both inside and out.

“Why is an El Nino happening in a non-El Nino year?” meteorologist and Weather Channel anchor Jim Cantore posed the question to *Lake Tahoe News* after the conference. The question could have been on the minds of everyone in the room after Mother Nature dumped a deluge of floodwaters and multiple feet of snow on the Sierra Nevada region.

Climatologists have long warned that climate change would be most noticeable with extreme weather events.

And despite a new Congress and administration filled with climate change deniers taking residence in Washington, D.C., this month, those on the frontline in forging the science to monitor man’s fossil-fuel impacts on the natural world see the lights at the end of the tunnel.

Sen. De Leon assured the attentive crowd that his state government would do everything in its power to hold back the weight of a changing federal government that has positioned human-caused climate change as a hoax at the very top spot in elected office.

“California is not waiting for Congress to pull its head out of the desert sand,” de Leon said, while reminding those in attendance that the state alone represents the sixth largest economy in the world.

This economy is discovering the financial benefits of converting dirty energy into clean, renewable technology. He even made the case that clean energy is becoming more cost efficient, as well as one that protects the livelihoods of current and future generations.



California Senate President Kevin de Leon won't let the feds change state policy. Photo/Denise Haerr

"Clean energy is already out competing dirty energy on prices – even without subsidies," he said. "With (President-elect Donald) Trump, there's nothing he can do to make the case for coal."

At one point, de Leon theorized that the reason why coal miners fight to hold onto the method of resource extraction is because it's part of their culture – a way of life that past generations have come to rely on to put food on the table.

Further, he made it clear that he understands the pain of losing one's way of life, an overwhelming abyss that may lead to divorce, loss of home, children and job and even suicide in some cases.

So de Leon advocated using a simpler way of talking about global climate, minus the massive statistics, to have a reasonable discussion with those who doubt the science.

He also urged believers to involve the human factor in the discussion.

"Climate change is not about polar bears. It's about people," he said. "A majority of Americans don't understand the risk (of not acting)."

In California, the senator's goal of building a new, low-carbon economy hit a major milestone with Senate Bill 350, which essentially dictates that half the electricity in the state will be generated through renewable energy by 2030.

"That's a big step," he said.

California has always been on the forefront of emissions control compared to other states. But with a perceived threat from a new federal government, de Leon pledged the state would not only refuse to halt efforts, but would "double down" on its initiatives to change the tide of looming global danger.

"We're not going to let one election change our values. Our biggest threat to our state is our (federal) head of state," he said.

So how do we double down?

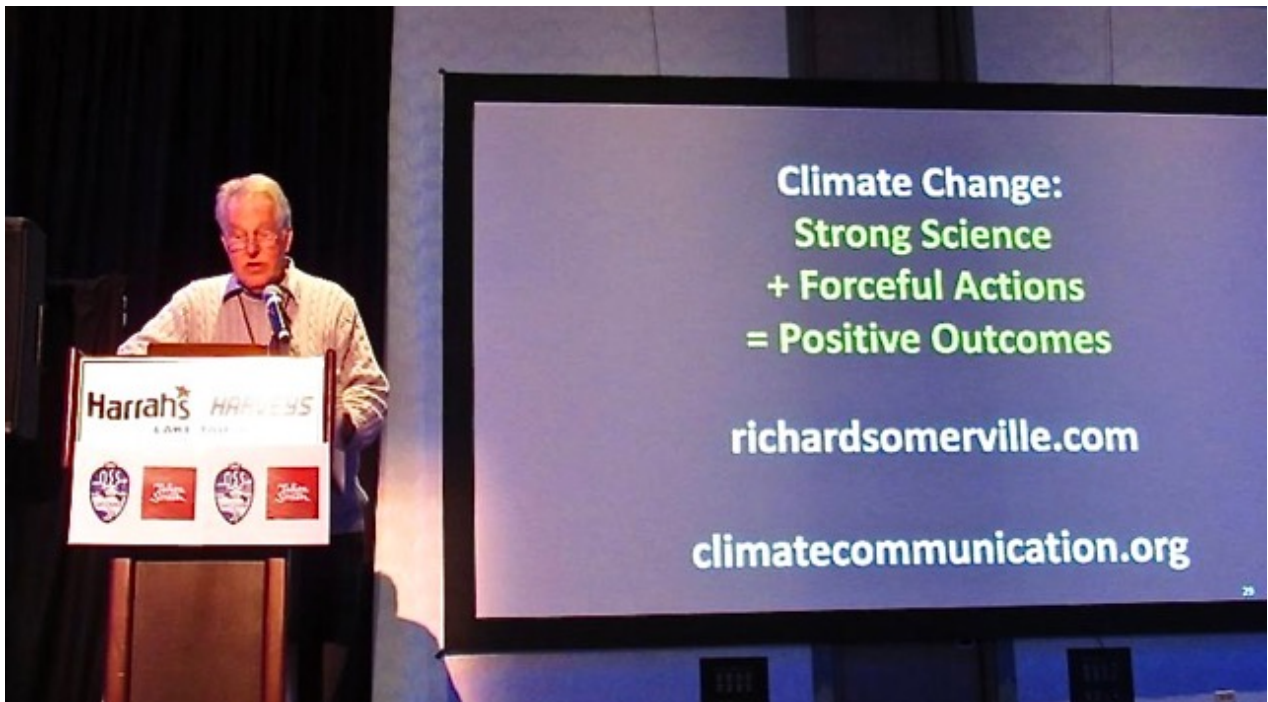
When asked by *Lake Tahoe News* if California should build its own wall becoming isolationist or reach out in a consortium of other states, de Leon replied that efforts are already under way for the latter.

"We're reaching out to other like-minded states to reach agreements in MOUs," the keynote speaker said, listing Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Illinois and the cluster of New England states as kin to the cause.

The first Latino leader of the state Senate also revealed that state representatives have met with federal authorities in Mexico to pool their resources and support each other's causes.

"In Mexico, climate change is not controversial. It's not left wing or right wing," he said.

Mexico's empathy to California's plight was a crucial point in the underlying theory mentioned through the morning that climate change denying is rooted in politics, not science.



Scientist Richard Somerville speaks Jan. 12 in Stateline about climate change. Photo/Denise Haerr

Climate change – right or wrong?

Scientists like Somerville are in good company in California.

In a stern rallying cry, Gov. Jerry Brown pleaded with thousands of scientists last month at one of the largest international gatherings of its kind to mobilize for the climate fight.

“The time has never been more urgent or your work never more important,” he said, promising the “truth-tellers” that the state and its main cause will persevere. “We will pursue a path of collaboration and bold political advancement – whatever they do in Washington – and eventually the truth will prevail.”

To climate experts like Somerville, the evidence is overwhelming as he placed image upon image of revealing data on a screen that supports the notion that the climate is changing and humans are the main cause.

“CO2 levels are rising conclusively. Each new decade is

getting warmer," he told the hushed audience. "This isn't a string of evidence. This is a thick rope of evidence."

At one point, he turned to the evidence going on outside as an extreme weather event supporting his claim.

Somerville broke his explanation down to sport.

"Carbon dioxide is the steroids of our climate system," he said.

The analogy is: Do we ask 'do the steroids of the (baseball) slugger cause the home run?' Or, 'does it increase the odds?'

"There's no silver bullet that solves this problem. It's silver buckshot," Somerville said, mentioning more use of solar power and reducing our dependency on resource extraction energy methods as things to do.

"We have to change the lack of political will to act," he said.

Somerville turned to France – the world's largest producer of electricity – as an example of a nation that has turned around its method of operation in energy use. In just a quarter century, it's now dominated by nuclear power.

"Those who claim we can't change from fossil fuels are just wrong. It's been proven. France did it," he said.

The prospect of the silver buckshot has a slight silver lining – but much work in store.

Somerville noted he's encouraged by the majority of Americans accepting the science of climate change.

"However, when the entire Republican leadership doesn't accept the science, then we have a long way to go," he said.

The scientist proposed that even if Trump doesn't believe the science, he may cave to averting becoming "a laughing stock"

in front of other world leaders who overwhelmingly have supported the global climate action plans as recently as the Paris Agreement signed last November, days before the election.

Somerville believes the truth-tellers should make an economic argument since the climate change deniers use that as a way to spur inaction.

During the question-and-answer session, attendees even asked for tips to convince climate change deniers to see the science differently.

“What’s worked for you?” longtime environmentalist Karen Fink asked Somerville.

He suggested more empathy and open minds to have a meaningful discussion.

“People tend to trust people who share their values. You could say: ‘Let’s (at least) agree on this,’” he said.

Somerville uses a cute analogy of the “Uncle Pete” in the room, the naysayer that ruins the family dinner with his refusal to refute climate myths. Uncle Pete is the inspiration for developing a website www.skepticalscience.com to combat closed-mindedness.

“We found the enemy. And the enemy is us,” he said.