Red-state Utah embraces plan to tackle climate crisis in surprising shift

Utah aims to reduce emissions over air quality concerns as other red states are also starting to tackle global heating

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Andrea Smardon in Salt Lake City

In a move to protect its ski slopes and growing economy, Utah - one of the reddest states in the nation - has just created a long-term plan to address the climate crisis.
And in a surprising turnaround, some of the state’s conservative leaders are welcoming it.

“If we don’t think about Utah’s long-term future, who will?” Republican state house speaker Brad Wilson said at a recent focus group to discuss the proposals.

At the request of the Republican-dominated state legislature, a University of Utah economic thinktank produced the plan to reduce emissions affecting both the local air quality and the global climate.

Project lead Thomas Holst, an energy analyst, never expected to be at the helm of an effort like this. A few years ago, the Utah legislature passed a resolution urging the EPA to “cease its carbon dioxide reduction policies, programs, and regulations until climate data and global warming science are substantiated”.

But now the perspectives of some state lawmakers - and of Holst, who spent most of his career in the oil and gas industry - have shifted.

“The economist Adam Smith talked about an invisible hand that guides the economy, and in this particular case, the cost of renewable energy, whether it’s wind or solar, has gone down so rapidly and made itself so market efficient versus fossil fuels, that there is a change, and the change can’t be ignored,” Holst said. “So now is the opportunity for a state like Utah which is rich in both renewables as well as fossil fuels to embrace that change and get out ahead of it.”

Other red states and municipalities are slowly starting to address global heating. After banning the words “climate change” from state environmental agencies, Florida now has a chief resilience officer tasked with preparing for sea level rise. After a year of disastrous flooding, Nebraska lawmakers advanced a bill to develop a climate change plan for a full legislative debate.

Utah prides itself on being business friendly - and it has a rapidly growing tech sector concerned about environmental issues, as well as booming tourist economy that revolves around the ski industry and public lands.

The Utah plan, known as the Utah Roadmap, began, like a number of recent environmental initiatives, with young people clamoring for action. High school students drafted a resolution that recognized the impacts of the climate crisis and encouraged emissions reductions, and persuaded two Republican lawmakers to sponsor it. Environmental advocates say it was the first measure of its kind to pass in a red state. The legislature followed up with state money for experts to provide policy recommendations.
Another factor that has primed Utah leaders to address the climate crisis is the state’s unique air quality issues. The majority of the population lives in mountain valleys where in winter, temperature inversions can trap air pollutants, often reaching levels that impact health, particularly among children and the elderly.

“It cuts across political lines. [Clean air] is not a partisan issue in our state,” said Utah speaker Wilson. He said there is not the same kind of consensus on climate change in the legislature, but “there is absolutely overlap between air quality concerns we have and reducing greenhouse gas emissions”.

Natalie Gochnour, the head of the economic policy institute that drafted the Utah Roadmap, said its proponents managed to turn a hyper-partisan issue into a shared priority by emphasizing the local impacts of the climate crisis. Research suggests that framing policy around economic benefits and sustainability allows local leaders to respond to climate change without getting caught up in political divisions.

“That tends to pull some of the politics out of it - not for everybody - but for many. I think enough to create momentum on Capitol Hill,” Gochnour said.

Clean air concerns are also the reason officials are pushing Utah gas refineries to produce cleaner gasoline, and when the Trump administration announced plans to roll back clean car standards, Utah’s bipartisan clean air caucus held a press conference urging Congress to resist the move.

Holst, the roadmap project lead, acknowledged that blue coastal states have taken the initiative on ameliorating climate change, but he sees potential for Utah. “Is there an opportunity for a red state to take a leadership role? We believe that there is. And by composing a road map, by encouraging our legislative leaders to embrace this, we believe that there can be a change, and that Utah will be willing to take a leadership role,” he said.

Utah’s per capita carbon emissions are higher than most states, in part because it’s nearly twice as reliant on coal, but utilities serving Utah customers plan to close many of their coal power plants by 2030, converting to wind, solar, natural gas, and possibly hydrogen. Republican state lawmaker Melissa Garff Ballard has an ambitious plan to make Utah a source of hydrogen power serving the western US.

Among the Utah Roadmap’s top priorities is to reduce CO2 emissions by half over the next decade - a challenge for a state with a growing population. The plan suggests focusing on energy-efficient buildings and clean transportation options. It recommends expanding Utah’s network of charging stations, incentivizing the purchase of electric vehicles, and involving auto dealers in strategies to increase the zero-emissions vehicle supply.

Business leaders have told Holst they are drafting a document that would pledge to move forward with the Utah Roadmap’s recommendations.

“What I’m interested in is a viable future for the state of Utah,” Republican state representative Stephen Handy said. “There are still a number of Utah legislators who don’t want to look at the science that’s very obvious on climate change, but we’ve come a long way.”

This article was amended on 19 February 2020 to clarify Brad Wilson’s comments on clean air.