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New report finds many California cities need additional staffing, planning to capitalize on historic influx of federal climate cash

Even local governments with detailed blueprints for slashing greenhouse emissions often lack the dedicated resources needed to realize ambitious climate pledges

San Francisco, California — Cities and counties across the state have a historic opportunity over the next decade to pull in millions of dollars in [state](#) and [federal](#) funding in the fight against climate change, including from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act.

However, a [new report](#) from UC Berkeley’s Center for Law, Energy, & the Environment, the Institute for Local Government and Next 10 found that many municipalities need more detailed plans and government staffing to mobilize effective climate action amid this extraordinary investment.

“As the state faces worsening impacts from climate change, local governments are the front line defense for our communities,” said F. Noel Perry, founder of the nonprofit Next 10. “We need to identify the barriers cities and counties face so we can take full advantage of the historic federal and state funding available to better protect ourselves now and in the future.”

The report — *Getting to Implementation: The Status of Local Climate Action in California* — surveyed municipalities across the state to gauge the progress of local efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect residents against the worst impacts of climate change, from flooding and drought to wildfires and extreme heat. About a third of cities and counties responded to the survey, representing more than half of the state’s population.

Only about half of responding jurisdictions had adopted an official climate action plan, areas that tended to be larger and wealthier. Smaller, more conservative jurisdictions with lower median household incomes were less likely to have such a document.

Local governments will automatically qualify for some of the new state and federal funding, but large pots of money are allocated through competitive grants. Researchers said that cities and counties with robust staffing and detailed blueprints for addressing the climate emergency will have a significant advantage when applying for these crucial resources.



That includes, for example, [\\$4.6 billion](#) in the recently announced U.S. EPA Climate Pollution Reduction Grants. Applicants design their own proposed programs, which could include anything from electric appliances rebates to vehicle charging ports to expanding public transit.

The report found a major roadblock to ongoing climate action comes down to government staffing. Only 6% of responding jurisdictions reported having more than five employees working on climate issues, with most local governments maintaining less than one full-time position. A third of respondents said they had no staff at all working on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

“As evident by the survey findings, many of California’s local governments currently lack the staff capacity necessary to first access critical funding for climate planning and then implement strategic planning efforts,” said Hanna Payne, co-author of the report and climate policy research fellow at UC Berkeley’s Center for Law, Energy, & the Environment.

Local officials were well aware of the challenges facing their cities and counties, according to the survey. Jurisdictions repeatedly identified a lack of adequate staffing and financial resources as both the biggest barriers and the most important resources for implementing climate policy.

The large influx of state and federal funding could help many jurisdictions jumpstart these climate programs, but only if they can first secure the new resources. Nearly half of respondents said accessing state or federal grants was “not easy.”

Smaller municipalities expressed a desire for more non-competitive funding and grant applications with fewer barriers to completion. Officials noted that funding sources that require them to compete with larger cities and counties are often a time sink.

“This report reinforces what we’ve witnessed in local agencies for many years,” said Erica Manuel, CEO and executive director of the Institute for Local Government, the nonprofit affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. “The desire to advance climate action and sustainability goals is there, but the capacity and resources are not. Additional investments in technical assistance, flexible funding and workforce development will go a long way toward achieving our shared climate goals.”

California is at a critical point in its efforts to decarbonize the economy. In 2022, Governor Newsom [signed AB 1279](#), enshrining the state’s carbon neutrality target into law. Meeting this goal will require planning and coordination across all levels of government.

The transition away from fossil fuels won’t be easy even for the most ambitious cities. San Francisco, for example, may need to spend as much as \$21.9 billion to fully realize its climate plan, [according to a report](#) last year from UC Berkeley.

With the substantial influx of state and federal funding, local jurisdictions have the potential to make significant headway on projects that reduce emissions and protect residents against worsening natural disasters. But researchers found that many municipalities, especially smaller, rural cities and counties, may struggle to capitalize on this historic moment.



Key findings include:

- Staffing capacity and funding were consistently ranked by municipalities among the highest needs for implementation of climate policies, from launching composting programs to promoting dense walkable neighborhoods served by transit. These resources were ranked far above other factors, such as political will and community partnerships.
- The majority of responding jurisdictions had fewer than one full-time staff member dedicated to climate planning. Only about a quarter of respondents had between one and five people working on such issues.
- About 53% of respondents said state and federal grants were a top need, but 42% said they needed assistance identifying and applying for available funding.
- Responding jurisdictions were most active in implementing climate policies related to land use and transportation, followed by energy and buildings.
- Many jurisdictions needed additional resources dedicated to protecting residents against climate-driven disasters, such as drought, flooding, wildfire and extreme heat.
- Respondents in smaller communities are more likely to implement policies that support climate goals while achieving other co-benefits for residents, frequently framing these strategies as in support of public health.

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[Next 10](#) is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that works at the nexus of the economy, the environment and quality of life issues to educate the public and equip policymakers with the expert research and data they need to implement comprehensive, effective solutions to the most pressing issues of the day. Our work focuses on three program areas: Clean Energy, Economy & Governance, and Budget. Through education and civic engagement, we hope Californians will become more empowered to affect change.

[Center for Law, Energy, & the Environment](#) channels the expertise and creativity of the Berkeley Law community into pragmatic policy solutions to environmental and energy challenges. We work with government, business, and the nonprofit sector to help solve urgent problems that require innovative and often interdisciplinary approaches. Drawing on the combined expertise of faculty, staff, and students across UC Berkeley, we strive to translate empirical findings into smart public policy solutions that better our environmental and energy governance systems.

[Institute for Local Government](#) empowers local government leaders and delivers real-world expertise to help them navigate complex issues, increase their capacity, and build trust in their communities. Founded in 1955, ILG helps public servants navigate the constantly changing landscape of their jobs by offering training, technical assistance, written resources and facilitation services specifically designed for local agencies. From climate action to leadership to public engagement and workforce development, ILG helps cities, counties and special districts make progress on their most pressing issues. While respecting and honoring its past, ILG is also intently focused on the present and future. In these difficult economic times, the need for the ILG's best practices, capacity building and training is even greater. Visit www.ca-ilg.org to find out more.