Washington Gov. Inslee proposes ‘Clean Energy Smart Deal’ for next state legislative session

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(GeekWire Photo / Gregory Scruggs)
Electric vehicles cruising I-5, net-zero buildings emerging from construction sites, high-speed rail zipping through Cascadia, electric-hybrid ferries plying Puget Sound, and nary a coal-fired power plant in sight. That could be Washington’s future if Gov. Jay Inslee and his allies in the state legislature pass a suite of clean energy proposals next year.

While diplomats half a world away in Poland negotiate how countries can meet their Paris Agreement pledges to reduce carbon emissions, Inslee announced Monday a plan to keep the state on track to its legally binding commitment to reduce the emissions 25 percent below 1990 levels by 2035. The proposal will not revive a carbon tax, which has failed twice at the ballot box and twice in the legislature since 2015.

“Washington state will fulfill its destiny to lead the clean energy revolution in the world today,” Inslee said, speaking at the Smart Building Center in Seattle’s Pacific Tower.

Now we’re in a decade where Washington state can lead the world in clean energy development.

The main components of the proposal are a managed transition to zero fossil fuels in electricity generation by 2045, a clean fuel standard in line with the rest of the West Coast, funding for electric vehicle infrastructure and incentives, retrofitting public buildings, pilot demonstrations of net-zero affordable housing and schools, energy-efficiency tweaks to the state building code, and a program to phase out the so-called “superpollutant” of hydrofluorocarbons.

The governor called his plan the “Clean Energy Smart Deal,” echoing the “Green New Deal” progressive proposal for federal investment in environmental sustainability that led to protests this week in Washington, D.C. as climate activists sought to pin down Democratic party leaders ahead of the next Congress that takes office in January.

Given the national implications of a banner climate policy, Inslee remained cagey about his presidential aspirations when asked if the plan was a springboard to a possible White House bid.

“I don’t think anybody who cares about their children cares about anybody’s electoral prospects,” he said.

The governor preferred to focus within state boundaries, highlighting existing clean energy businesses and technology under development in Washington state. He cited SGL Automotive Carbon Fibers’ facility in Moses Lake, the world’s largest manufacturer of carbon fiber for electric vehicles, as well as the REG biodiesel plant in Greys Harbor, and the state’s largest solar farm in Lind.
Recalling the major state industries that Inslee saw flourish in his youth and young adulthood, from commercial aviation to software, he said, “Now we’re in a decade where Washington state can lead the world in clean energy development.”

Inslee insisted that the clean energy economy is growing at twice the rate of the rest of the state’s economy.

“Washington State didn’t become home to some of the great companies on this planet by accident,” said State Senator Reuven Carlyle, a Democrat whose Seattle district includes Amazon’s headquarters. “We had a sense of intentionality about our quality of life and we have that same sense of intentionality now as we think about the next generation of a clean economy.”

Most of the proposals consist of direct public investment in transportation and buildings, which would in theory spur future job growth in that sector. For example, the plan calls for $117.5 million to secure four hybrid-electric ferries through a combination of purchase and conversion, a $35 million investment to retrofit public buildings, $22.5 million to modernize the state electric grid, $5 million to buy more electric vehicles for the state motor pool, and $10 million each to develop 750 units of affordable housing and build four schools, both to net-zero standards.

“Washington state is going to have the cleanest transportation system in America today because we will be using totally clean electricity to power an electrified transportation system,” Inslee said. The plan also includes $3.25 million to establish a new public authority for 250-mph high-speed rail along the Cascadia corridor.
Other regulatory measures include adopting a clean fuel standard that would require providers to reduce the total carbon intensity of fuel 20 percent by 2030, in line with similar standards adopted by California, Oregon, and British Columbia. On the building front, Inslee proposed a “stretch code” that would allow local governments to set energy efficiency standards higher than the state minimum. **Phasing out hydrofluorocarbons** follows California, Connecticut, Maryland and New York, which all announced plans to eliminate this greenhouse gas from their states earlier this year following a move by the Trump administration to rescind an EPA-approved national phase out of the gas. It’s commonly found in aerosols, refrigeration, heat pumps, and air conditioning systems.

Finally, Representative Gael Tarleton (D-Ballard) announced her intention to introduce the Clean Energy Transition Act that would wean all 63 state utilities off fossil fuels, including the last of the coal-fired generators at Colstrip in eastern Montana.

While the proposal was light on specifics about possible costs to consumers — a major sticking point in the carbon tax — Carlyle was adamant about voter support for the upcoming legislation.

“For the people of Washington state, climate change is not an academic theory, a white paper, or a nebulous concept,” he said. “It’s a real, tangible concept: It’s about orcas, salmon, forests, water quality, shellfish, soil quality, and everything that’s real to real people living real lives. It’s real, it’s authentic, it’s happening, and people want meaningful action.”

A professional Election Day exit poll funded by environmental groups found that 64 percent of 1,200 respondents want to see Washington state take climate action.

Inslee cited $600 million in lost agricultural production, a possible 22 percent reduction in salmon habitat, and a potential 70 percent loss for the snow recreation industry as future impacts of unchecked climate change.

Not that he let the numbers get him down.

“Why do we have optimism? It’s because of who we are,” he said. “We invent, we create, we build.”

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