

Sightline Institute

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PROGRESS REPORT: NORTHWEST GETS FAILING GRADE ON ENERGY

Economic toll of fossil fuels in 2008: \$2,500 per person

Seattle, WA – Washington, Oregon, and Idaho spent a record \$29.5 billion on fossil fuel imports in 2008, according to the Cascadia Scorecard, an annual progress report on the Pacific Northwest released today by Sightline Institute at <http://scorecard.sightline.org>.

“That’s the equivalent of nearly \$2,500 per person,” said Clark Williams-Derry, Sightline research director and lead author of the Scorecard. “Fossil fuels took an unprecedented bite out of the region’s economy last year. And because we import virtually all of our fuels, just about every dollar spent on fossil fuels means one less dollar spent locally. It’s a lose-lose situation.”

The 2009 update of the Scorecard—a project launched by Sightline in 2004 to track seven long-term trends critical to the region’s progress—spotlighted energy as the region’s worst-performing trend. Overall, it found that the Northwest is achieving modest progress toward goals of robust human health, shared economic prosperity, and a legacy of thriving nature.

“We made significant improvements in health and modest headway in smart growth in recent years,” said Williams-Derry. “But our progress on economic security and ecosystem health is mixed at best, and we’re lagging way behind world leaders in energy efficiency.”

Key findings from the 2009 Scorecard include:

Energy’s economic toll reaches record high in 2008: Spending on fossil fuels in the Northwest States quadrupled in just a decade, reaching a record high in 2008 of \$29.5 billion, including \$16.6 billion in Washington, \$9.4 billion in Oregon, and \$3.6 billion in Idaho. The Scorecard also reported a disappointing 12 percent increase in electricity consumption in homes and businesses between 2003 and 2008.

Northwest drivers easing off the gas: The good news about energy is that northwesterners are using less gasoline per person than they have since 1965. Idaho’s reductions have been especially notable—declining more than one-fifth per person in a single decade. And despite a 15 percent increase in population over the last decade, Cascadia used no more gasoline in 2008 than in 1998. But northwesterners still consume, on average, the energy equivalent of 2 gallons of gasoline per person per day in transportation fuels and nonindustrial electricity—nearly double the Scorecard model, Germany.

BC residents are healthiest, surpass goal: Of the seven trends, the region performs best on health, as measured by lifespan, and British Columbia continues to lead. Not only do BC residents live an average of two years longer than residents of the Northwest states, but if BC were an independent nation, it would have the second longest lifespan in the world, after Japan.

Teen birthrates tick upward, reversing long-term slide: Teen birthrates rose in 2006 and again in 2007, a troubling trend that broke a long-standing decline that had been underway since the 1990s. Birthrates as a whole also rose, and the Northwest states still struggle with high rates of births from unintended pregnancies.

Stalled economic progress: Prior to 2008, northwesterners enjoyed several years of modest gains in economic security, with unemployment inching down and median incomes inching upward. However, a steep rise in unemployment in late 2008 may foretell rising poverty and falling middle-class incomes.

The Scorecard findings, Williams-Derry said, point to the need for smart solutions that address several of our most pressing challenges at once. One such policy he highlighted is a regional cap-and-invest system that would limit climate-warming emissions while creating revenue to protect families from rising energy costs. The 2009 legislatures in Oregon and Washington are considering bills to implement such a system.

U.S. Rep. Jay Inslee (D-Wash.), a national clean energy leader, commented: “In light of the financial and climate crises now underway, it’s clear that paying \$30 billion dollars a year for fossil fuel energy, as our region did last year, is unsustainable in the long term. Sightline Institute’s research reinforces once again that we must invest in clean, homegrown, renewable sources of energy and pair that with a robust cap-and-invest program to set a fair price on carbon. First, the Pacific Northwest led the world in revolutionizing commercial air travel, then it led the world in the revolutionizing computer software—and it is poised to lead the world in the clean energy revolution.”

The Cascadia Scorecard compares the Pacific Northwest to real-world models for each trend, including Japan for life expectancy, Germany for energy efficiency, and Vancouver, BC, for curbing sprawl.

This update finds that even if the region makes steady improvements in all of the trends that the Scorecard monitors, it won’t be until 2050 that the region’s average score matches that of places that have already racked up world-class performance.

With this update, the Cascadia Scorecard became an online resource, with all data, graphics, and sources at <http://scorecard.sightline.org>. Sightline Institute is an independent, Seattle-based nonprofit research and communications center that measures progress towards a sustainable economy and way of life in the Pacific Northwest, including British Columbia, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.