

## CAPITOL ALERT

### **‘Not about polar bears, but people.’ Latino lawmakers shift focus on climate change**

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State Sen. Ricardo Lara’s environmental awakening came when he left home and realized he didn’t have to shut his windows to avoid the dirty air.

Lara said he learned that not everyone played in rail yards, or had trucks idling in their neighborhoods because of the heavy congestion. When he asked his parents why they lived so close to the freeway, they told him it was out of convenience.

“The people that come from these communities are the ones that are having these discussions,” Lara said, reflecting on his upbringing this week at the UN climate talks in Germany. “There’s a been a big push for us to talk about how the policies are impacting people.”

Assemblywoman Cristina Garcia, whose past brush with environmentalism came when she formed a club with her sister in high school, said she was told early on in Sacramento by white environmentalists that her approach meant “you don’t get it.” It inspired her to talk about the stories of her neighbors as she began to prioritize climate change.

“We’re dealing with real clean-air issues, real health issues tied to that (in) these communities that have been left behind,” said Garcia, also a Democrat from Bell Gardens. They are “communities of color, communities that are low-income and more importantly communities that do not have the resources ... to adjust and be ready for these events that are coming and their mitigation.”

The legislators, attending the international climate conference this week, are part of a group of Latino officials from California at the vanguard of

climate policy in the U.S., shepherding legislation while working to redefine what it means to be an environmentalist.

Others pressing the issue are Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, who joined with his namesake in carrying the cap-and-trade package, and Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León, who is running for U.S. Senate and was in Rome this month with Gov. Jerry Brown for a [Vatican climate summit](#).

“It’s a reflection of the changing power structure of the state,” Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon said of his colleagues’ prominence on the cause.

In Bonn, Lara announced new legislation designed to cut down on dangerous gases in refrigerants and air conditioners he cast as a “a silent assassin.”

Garcia, chair of the Natural Resources Committee, sought to focus attention on the “human disasters” of climate change: Eight of the 10 most polluted cities in the U.S. are in California, she said. As temperatures rise, smog levels increase, she told attendees at an event on responding to disasters.

“We were the original urban farmers. You couldn’t go to an aunt’s house without ... walking away with a pot of something,” she said. “Or, having something grown. It was, ‘Go get me a chili from the backyard.’ ... We have to be at the table.”

Brown pointed her out from the stage as one of the “ladies” he reckoned with when the Democratic governor this summer pushed the controversial plan to extend the state’s cap-and-trade system for another decade.

Garcia talked about her work with Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, suggesting the diversity of the California Legislature has shifted power from coastal liberals to representatives whose districts are choked by freeways, rail yards and concrete riverbeds where residents bear the brunt of the pollution.

“They are living the impacts every time they go home,” said Jena Price, a partner at a consulting firm representing the California League of Conservation Voters.

Eduardo Garcia said he believes the conversation in the state mirrors talks at the international level: How do large developed parts of the world help developing areas where climate change is exacerbating poverty, inequality and migration patterns?

His inspiration came at the United Nations Climate Change Conference outside Paris, when Rendon, citing his temperament and work ethic, recommended to former Sen. Fran Pavley that she team up with him to work on Senate Bill 32. Pavley had carried Assembly Bill 32, establishing the nation's first cap on greenhouse gases. Her follow-up SB 32 measure to extend the targets was scuttled by a moderate bloc of Assembly Democrats in 2015 over oil industry concerns.

In Paris, “you could just see his eyes were wide open. He was taking it all in,” recalled Pavley. To Eduardo Garcia, it was “not about polar bears, but people, and particularly people in his district.”

They returned the next year and helped pass SB 32 and a companion measure, Garcia's Assembly Bill 197, boosting legislative oversight of the Air Resources Board and ensuring commissioners prioritize the most impacted and disadvantaged communities.

The bill “was a very important benchmark to hit for environmental justice communities that today are playing a much bigger role and stronger voice,” he said.

This year, Cristina Garcia set out to make her mark, introducing a cap-and-trade extension that paired renewal of the state's carbon market with curbs on air pollution and potential limits on industrial facilities. Her effort died in the Assembly in June.

Protracted talks between Brown, industry and environmental groups later in the year culminated in the narrow passage of Eduardo Garcia's cap-and-trade extension, AB 398, and Cristina Garcia's AB 617 to reduce air pollution impacting disadvantaged communities.

Still, their legislative successes have been scrutinized by some environmental activists. Gladys Limón, executive director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, called Cristina Garcia's bill “insufficient” to create real emission reductions locally and to justify the “regressive impacts” of Eduardo Garcia's effort.

“These leaders generally have very strong environmental records and have been critical stewards in developing the state's climate and energy policy,” Limón said in an interview. But “cap-and-trade is not a blueprint climate policy that we should be touting to other states, or internationally.”

Rendon said he understands the disappointment from some, but added the compromise package that passed with bipartisan support was “the best we were going to do.”

“We couldn’t have done any more,” he said.

Lara was in Paris nearly two years ago when he unveiled legislation to reduce short-lived climate pollutants, also known as “super-pollutants” because of their potent heat-trapping ability. He joined Brown this week in Germany to accept an award for California’s effort.

“We were able to quickly link the health of Californians with environmental policies for the first time,” he told climate scientists and public health officials from around the world. “It was important to bring that message home as we think globally, but act locally.”

He believes the word is getting out. On panels and in conversations in Bonn, he said attending scientists and policy experts fixated on California. Lawmakers from Massachusetts were asking about including transportation fuel suppliers into their cap-and-trade system.

Lara’s new proposal would reduce hydrofluorocarbons, used in such products as air conditioners and refrigerators, which disproportionately contribute to global warming. He said his ultimate goal is to change the conversation around climate change.

“There’s a discussion here about changing the metrics: Making it not just about temperature, but about how many lives we can save, how many tons of rice we can save in terms of agricultural land, how many homes can we save,” he said.

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