

A great deal of attention has been devoted to federalism issues relating to climate change mitigation. In contrast, the federalism dimension of adaptation has only begun to receive attention. Regardless of mitigation efforts, however, it is clear that society will experience substantial climate impacts and that major adaptation efforts will be required. What roles should the states and the federal government play in adaptation?

States and local governments are in many ways the natural “first responders” to climate change. They own or license critical infrastructure, provide health services, and control land use. The federal government, however, may step in to provide mandatory standards for adaptation efforts, to finance adaptation.

In general, it seems to me that spillovers should mainly determine the extent of the federal role. Where adaptation problems extend across state lines, the federal government should take the lead in funding adaptation and in setting standards. Otherwise, the states should *prima facie* have the lead role. But there are a number of reasons why the feds might desirably intervene even in the absence of spillover effects – states may lack the resources to fund adaptation, or they may be handicapped by lack of expertise or various political process problems, including the “race to the bottom” problem. Where adaptation efforts have purely local beneficiaries, however, it seems to make sense as a general matter for funding and control to reside locally rather than nationally.

If you’re interested in further discussion of these points, see [“Climate Adaptation and Federalism: Mapping the Issues.”](#)