All eyes are on the COP-15 proceedings in Copenhagen, and specifically on the prospects for greenhouse gas reductions emerging from the meeting. At the same time, we need to plan to adapt to some measure of climate change impacts, some of which are unavoidable regardless of our success at reducing GHG emissions, and to build resilience to those impacts. This aspect of the problem and solution is getting comparatively little attention from the media or from advocates right now.

And until recently, policymakers weren't paying much attention either. But that's starting to change: as Holly noted here, last week the State of California released the 2009 California Climate Adaptation Strategy report, the first attempt to comprehensively study the risks from climate change in California and to recommend strategies to reduce those risks. The report is groundbreaking in the sense that few governments anywhere in the U.S. have taken serious steps to to assess how best to adapt to climate change's impacts.

The report contains twelve preliminary strategies and recommendations:

(1) convening a Climate Adaptation Advisory Panel to research and submit a foll0w-up report by the end of 2010;

(2) changing water management and uses to reflect increasing water scarcity;

(3) avoiding significant new development in areas that cannot be adequately protected from flooding, wildfire and erosion due to climate change;

(4) requiring state agencies that manage or regulate resources relating to public health, infrastructure or habitat that are likely to be significantly affected by climate change to develop plans by September 2010 for dealing with those impacts;

(5) requiring state agencies to consider formally, under the California Environmental Quality Act, the impacts of locating particular development projects in areas susceptible to climate change impacts;

(6) assessing vulnerability from an emergency management and making this information available through web-based dissemination;

(7) identifying and protecting the habitats most vulnerable to climate change-related impacts over the coming century;

(8) building resilience to increased spread of disease and temperature increases

through specific guidance to be developed by the California Department of Public Health next year;

(9) amending local general plans to take climate change-related impacts and vulnerabilities into account and to develop strategies for dealing with them;

(10) taking climate change-related information into account in planning for wildfire management;

(11) maximizing the use of renewable energy as well as conservation efforts; and

(12) broadening and funding research on climate change's impacts.

I haven't read the entire report, which runs to 200 pages including appendices and tables, but based on the executive summary and a quick skim of the rest of the document, it appears to be a solid effort to synthesize existing knowledge about climate change's impacts in the state and to start on the road to developing real strategies to deal with those impacts.

Reports such as this one are important not only as a blueprint for developing policies and strategies to address the problem, but also to provide a more concrete picture of what climate change's impacts are likely to be on our everyday lives and on our public resources (including fiscal resources). Political will for addressing climate change in this country may be hampered by the abstractness and "global" nature of the problem – often illustrated by melting glaciers and sad polar bears – and the information in a report such as this one may have the potential to change that. Unfortunately, the stark realities discussed in the report aren't presented in a format that most people will respond to; take this, for example, from the report's executive summary:

> The strategies included in this report were approved by the CAT Team, which represents all of state government. Now, the CAT will lead in the coordination of measures and push to develop the necessary tools to effect adaptation protocols. California's mitigation (CAT) and adaptation (CAS) processes will be further integrated through extensive information exchange and consolidation of working groups from both efforts.

Not the most user-friendly discussion, perhaps. And the report was released with

no fanfare at all; I don’t believe it was covered in any daily newspaper.

[UPDATE: As reader RT points out in the comments, the governor did hold a press conference on this, and it received some newspaper coverage. Sorry I missed that.]

Nonetheless, I hope the message will slowly start to get out that understanding impacts and building resilience at the local and state level will be a crucial part of dealing with climate change’s effects on our state and our world.