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Climate change pact sends a message

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SF Chronicle Editorial

Climate change may still be a taboo topic in Congress. But the West Coast of the United States - and Canada - is leading the charge to tackle the issue.

The landmark climate change pact signed by the governors of California, Oregon and Washington, along with a representative of the premier of the province of British Columbia, may matter more as a political statement than hard policy statement.

But it's an important statement nonetheless, and it lays the groundwork for the region to create the kind of tough policy that we'll need to create in order to have an impact on global warming.

Crucially, it also lays the groundwork for regional policy - the kind of coordinated effort in which the U.S. has proved unwilling to join at the global level. This region is no slouch at the global level, either - combined, these three states and British Columbia represent the fifth largest economy in the world, with 53 million people and a combined annual GDP of \$2.8 trillion.

Under the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy, the four governments have agreed to put a price on carbon dioxide emissions. They've also agreed to use similar rules for encouraging the adoption

of electric cars and the development of alternative fuels. Sea acidification, another symptom of rising carbon dioxide levels, will also be studied and addressed.

There are two things that make the potential practical impact of the plan hard to measure. The first is that it's "nonbinding" - which means that it's subject to political conditions.

That may prove problematic in Washington and Oregon, where state legislatures have considered, but failed to pass, cap-and-trade bills. Both governors have pledged to give carbon pricing another try, but as California has learned with its own hard-won cap-and-trade program, it's a steep climb to convince a state legislature to do the right thing.

Further climate change legislation may even prove problematic in California - as the flock of antifracking demonstrators outside of Monday's signing ceremony reminded Gov. Jerry Brown. (British Columbia has already passed a carbon tax, which is the toughest policy of all.)

Political conditions may also determine the details of the agreement, and of how the region chooses to work on the electrical grid, fuel development and sea acidification. There will be lots of political pressure on all of these leaders to take shortcuts on these important issues.

The second thing that will affect the practical outcome of the plan is how much of an influence it's likely to have - or not have - on other states, provinces, and hopefully, the U.S. federal government.

If the region is successful in overcoming political obstacles and making a serious, sustained effort against climate change, that will inspire others to do the same. The impact of this plan would then become exponentially greater.

Likewise, a regional failure will affect the willingness of other governments to do the work that must be done to fight climate change. There's a lot at stake.