Climate Plan

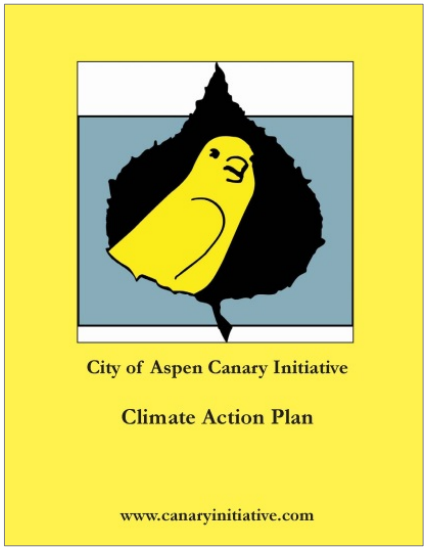
Source: Clarion Associates

Hazards Addressed

How it Works

Climate plans, also referred to as "climate action plans," are an increasingly common type of specialized plan developed by local governments to address the challenges of a changing climate. They are designed to provide a strategic framework for driving local actions to assess, understand, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, identified as a root cause of climate change. Plans increasingly also include strategies to prevent or minimize the anticipated adverse effects of climate change.

One distinction in climate planning terminology is important: "mitigation" refers to the practice of reducing greenhouse gases, while "adaptation" refers to anticipating and taking action to reduce the adverse consequences of climate change, including those relating to natural hazards risks. An example of a mitigation strategy might be converting public buses to biodiesel or other alternative fuels, while an example of an adaptation strategy would be adopting a larger setback from flood-prone areas.



The City of Aspen adopted its Climate Action Plan in 2007, one of the earliest plans adopted in the state, as part of the Canary Initiative, a community effort to reduce the threat of climate change. It has been recently updated for 2018-2020.

Source:
aspenpitkin.com/Portals/0/docs/City/GreenInitiatives/Canary/CAP-final%20without%20dates.pdf

At a minimum, climate plans include:

- An inventory of existing emissions;
- The identification of reduction goals or targets; and
- The evaluation and prioritization of local actions to achieve those emission goals or targets.

Ideally, they also include:

- An assessment of current and projected climatic conditions (based on data that is downscaled for local applicability);
- A strategy for preparing and adapting to the negative effects or consequences; and
- The identification of resources or funding sources required to implement the overall plan.

While local climate plans largely serve as a blueprint for emission reduction efforts, many communities find it advantageous to address climate preparedness and adaptation efforts in the same document. In these cases **the development and implementation of the climate plan should be integrated with the local hazard mitigation plan** to eliminate duplication of effort but also to ensure that the assessment and understanding of climate-related vulnerabilities and community risk reduction strategies are consistent and closely coordinated. Community goals and policies for climate change mitigation and adaptation should also be incorporated into the local comprehensive plan, as many strategies will likely overlap with policies across multiple elements. Colorado communities should be prepared for an increased threat from natural hazards such as drought, extreme heat, wildfire, or severe storms based on climate change projections.

Implementation

Similar to many other plans, the long-term effectiveness of climate plans requires the local adoption and execution of policies, actions, and programs identified in the plan, as well as measuring their success over time. Unique to climate plans, however, is the need to quantify, measure, and report progress on the reduction of greenhouse gases over a given time period as prescribed in the plan. Therefore, communities must be prepared to develop and maintain a greenhouse gas inventory or identify a source for this scientific data (such as the Colorado Climate Center, cited below).

Climate action plans also typically differentiate between community-wide actions and those assigned to specific local agencies or departments, each of which should be held accountable for managing certain sources of emissions. The implementation of climate plans also relies heavily on the completion of specific actions designed to mitigate or adapt to the effects of climate change. For purposes of natural hazard mitigation, this requires the routine tracking, evaluation, and reporting of risk reduction strategies that may also be referred to separately as climate adaptation or climate preparedness actions. Effective intergovernmental coordination on these parallel or overlapping efforts is paramount for success.

Where It's Been Done

Plaza near Union Station, Denver, CO.

Source: Arina P. Habich

In 2018, the **City of Denver** published the *80x50 Climate Action Plan*, which calls for deep decarbonization of buildings, transportation, and electricity generation. Reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050 (80x50) refers to the commitments made by signatories to the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, in order to limit warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius. The plan includes interim targets to:

- Reduce total community-wide greenhouse gas emissions 30 percent by 2025, a more aggressive goal than the Paris climate accords
- Make all new buildings net-zero by 2035
- Achieve 100 percent renewable electricity in municipal facilities by 2025 and community-wide by 2030
- Increase electric vehicle registrations in Denver to 30 percent by 2030.

The plan highlights key strategies in the three sectors most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions in the City: buildings, transportation and electricity generation.

In November 2015, **King County, Washington,** approved a comprehensive update to its *Strategic Climate Action Plan* (SCAP) which serves as a national best practice for a plan that actively addresses both climate change mitigation and adaptation. The plan includes two clear and distinct sections: one focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the other on preparing for climate change impacts, with the latter recognizing that many impacts are now inevitable. The SCAP effectively serves as King County's blueprint for climate action with a paramount goal to integrate mitigation and adaptation tactics into all areas of local government operations, plans, policies, and procedures – including the County's Comprehensive Plan, which began including climate resiliency recommendations in 2008.

In 2017, the **City of Boulder** released *Boulder's Climate Commitment*, a progress report on its climate actions. The report details the City's mitigation and adaptation efforts, including its commitment to use 100% renewable energy by 2030. The strategic framework laid out in the Climate Commitment guides the city's climate work in three action areas: energy, ecosystems, and resources.

The **City of Aspen** updated their *Climate Action Plan* in 2017, originally adopted in 2007, with renewed actions and goals for achieving a low-carbon city. Two documents were produced by the climate planning process: the *Greenhouse Gas Toolkit* and the *Climate Action Plan*, which draws on specific actions outlined in the Toolkit. The plan is guided by a vision to

reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the city 30% by 2020 and 80% by 2050, in line with recommendations from international climate change experts. Strategies are categorized by waste, aviation, transportation, commercial energy, and recreational energy with specific targets to reduce emissions in each sector.

Advantages and Key Talking Points

Climate plans establish the roadmap for how a community will address climate change through mitigation and adaptation activities. Climate plans can help assess and communicate how projected changes in climate may impact the community in social, economic, and environmental terms, and identify actionable and measureable strategies for minimizing those impacts. Other benefits include:

- Affirms that the community is locally engaged in the issue of global climate change.
- Describes how climate change is expected to affect future economic and environmental conditions, including natural hazards.
- Establishes clear goals and targets to evaluate progress over time.
- Includes a variety of no-cost or low-cost investment opportunities along with "no regret" policy options that elected leaders can more readily support.
- Provides an additional mechanism for implementing or advancing hazard risk reduction strategies (climate adaptation). For example, climate plans may support and/or be directly linked to actions identified in the local hazard mitigation plan, such as the replacement of aging stormwater infrastructure to better accommodate increased flows resulting from more intense rainfall events and earlier spring runoff.
- Can complement a community's hazard mitigation plan by helping to inform the risk assessment and mitigation strategy.

"No Regret" Policy Options

Due to the uncertainties associated with future climate change, many communities are seeking to identify and prioritize "no-regrets" approaches to their decision-making process. These include actions that can be easily justified from social, economic, and/or environmental perspectives based on current conditions and whether the impacts of climate change and natural hazard events actually occur or not. In other words, no-regrets actions are considered cost-effective now under a range of future scenarios and do not involve hard trade-offs with other policy or funding alternatives.

Challenges

Climate plans often require technical and scientific expertise to prepare, particularly in downscaling global or regional climate model data and developing a local baseline inventory of greenhouse gas emissions. Such expertise may not be available locally and can be expensive to obtain. Other related challenges include:

- Climate change remains a potentially divisive issue for some stakeholders, including elected officials.

- Uncertainty and wide ranges of potential future scenarios are inherent to any long-term climate model projections.
- Can be challenging to implement specific actions and achieve goals without adequate funding or resources, particularly for emissions reduction.

Key Facts

Administrative capacity	Community planner supported by experts in climate science
Mapping	Not typically required
Regulatory requirements	None required, but can support plan implementation
Maintenance	Should be updated at a regular time interval, preferably every three to five years
Adoption required	Yes
Statutory reference	N/A
Associated costs	Staff time, plus potential costs for quantifying greenhouse gas emissions, downscaling climate models or other technical work, public outreach activities, and/or consultant services

Examples

City of Aspen Climate Action Plan	https://www.cityofaspen.com/DocumentCenter/View/1893/Aspens-Climate-Action-Plan-2018-2020
City of Boulder Climate Action Plan	bouldercolorado.gov/climate
Town of Carbondale Energy and Climate Protection Plan	https://www.carbondalegov.org/document_center/Building/Energy%20and%20Climate%20Protection%20Plan.PDF
City and County of Denver Climate Action and Adaptation Plans	https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/771/documents/Climate/CAP%20-%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf
City of Fort Collins Climate Action Plan Framework	https://www.fcgov.com/climateadaptation/
City of Glenwood Springs Energy and Climate Action Plan	garfieldcleanenergy.org/pdf/government/climate-plans/Glenwood-Springs-ECAP.pdf
Town of Basalt Climate Action Plan	http://basalt.net/333/Climate-Change

King County, WA Strategic Climate Action Plan	https://www.kingcounty.gov/services/environment/climate/actions-strategies/climate-strategies/strategic-climate-action-plan.aspx
State of Colorado Climate Plan and Water Plan	https://www.codot.gov/programs/environmental/Sustainability/colorado-climate-plan-2015 (Climate Plan) colorado.gov/cowaterplan (Water Plan)

For More Information

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Climate Change Website
colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/categories/services-and-information/environment/air-quality/climate-change

Colorado Water Conservation Board Climate Change Website
cwcb.state.co.us/environment/climate-change/Pages/main.aspx

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Climate Hubs
https://www.climatehubs.oce.usda.gov/hubs/northern-plains

Colorado Climate Network
http://rockymountainclimate.org/index.htm

Colorado Climate Change Vulnerability Study
wwa.colorado.edu/climate/co2015vulnerability

Colorado Climate Center
http://climate.colostate.edu/

The Colorado Climate Preparedness Project
https://wwa.colorado.edu/publications/reports/WWA_ColoClimatePreparednessProject_Report_2011.pdf

Compact of Colorado Communities
https://www.compactofcoloradocommunities.org/home/

Rocky Mountain Climate Organization
rockymountainclimate.org