CLIMATE NEWS

From Sheldon Whitehouse, Barbara Boxer, and Jeff Merkley
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Water Levels Fall in Great Lakes, Take Toll on Shipping

Warmer temperatures have caused water levels in the Great Lakes to drop below their long-term averages during the past 14 years, putting the $34 billion Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway shipping industry in peril. The most recent causes were the mild winters of 2011 and 2012, which left too little snow—traditionally the lakes' largest water source—to feed them, said the Army Corps' Keith Kompoltowicz. Last spring, the water level rose just 4 inches instead of the usual 12 in Lakes Michigan and Huron, followed by an unusually dry summer and above-average evaporation in the fall—12 inches more than average. The water level currently stands at 577.20 feet, 22 inches below the long-term average. Climate change is expected to reduce the water levels of the Great Lakes still further in the long run, according to a U.S. Maritime Administration report. Glen G. Nekvasil of the Lake Carriers' Association said shipowners have had to lighten their loads, making hauling less efficient and profitable. A large laker, 1,000 feet long, will lose 250 to 270 tons for every inch the water level drops, which can amount to up to 324,000 tons a season per boat, he said. Richard D. Stewart, director of the Transportation and Logistics Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, explained that over time, costlier shipping will result in higher prices for consumers. *(New York Times)*

U.S. and China Make Deal on Greenhouse Gases

The U.S. and China recently announced an agreement to phase down the use of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), which have gained widespread use in recent years for industrial applications, especially as a refrigerant. HFCs are a particularly potent type of greenhouse gas (GHGs), hundreds or even thousands of times more powerful than carbon dioxide (CO_2). The White House said the phase-down could eventually cut global emissions by the equivalent of 90 billion tons of CO_2, or two years' worth of global GHG emissions. Unlike CO_2, which can last in the atmosphere for a century, GHGs like methane and HFCs are short-lived climate pollutants, meaning that they stay in the atmosphere for a few weeks or months—but they pack a powerful warming wallop while they do. Research suggests that tackling these pollutants could cut the rate of global warming and sea-level rise in half—and the effects could be more dramatic in regions where pollutants accumulate locally, contributing to glacier melt, health problems, and other woes. *(WSJ)*

Global Warming to Be Double the 2 Degree Target

Global temperatures are on track to rise by more than double the 2°C (3.6°F) warming goal set by the United Nations (UN) unless urgent measures are taken, the International Energy Agency (IEA) warned in a recent report. "The path we are currently on is more likely to result in a temperature increase of between 3.6 and 5.3°C (6.5-9.5°F)," said IEA executive director Maria van der Hoeven. The Paris-based agency urged governments to tackle energy-sector emissions, saying the 2°C target could still be met without jeopardizing economic growth. IEA said carbon pollution from fossil fuel use rose by 1.4 percent last year to a record 31.6 billion tons globally. The report was issued as UN members gathered in Germany for a second week of talks on a global pact to limit carbon emissions. The UN is targeting a global average temperature rise of 2°C from pre-industrial levels for what scientists believe would be manageable climate change, avoiding worst-case-scenario increases in droughts, storms, floods, and sea level rise. *(AFP)*

Northeast Carbon-Offset Sale Raises a Record $124.5 Million

The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), the Northeast's cap-and-trade program for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, raised a record $124.5 million in its quarterly auction of carbon allowances after slashing next year's supply by almost half. RGGI sold all of the 38.8 million allowances that were offered at a clearing price of $3.21, up from $2.80 in March and the first time in the program's history that prices increased in two consecutive quarters. This also marks the first time since 2010 that every allowance was sold in two consecutive quarters. The surplus had depressed prices to no more than $1.93 in the 11 quarterly events through December. "RGGI continues to generate hard data showing that market-based emission-reduction programs are an effective way to realize environmental goals," said chairman Collin O'Mara. Each permit allows a company to emit one ton of carbon dioxide. Participating states—including the six New England states, New York, Delaware, and Maryland use the proceeds for renewable energy and utility programs, assisting consumers with bills, or to pad general funds. *(Bloomberg)*