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Action on Global Warming: Making Room for Tribal Governments in the New Kind of Wedge Issue

A presentation by Dean B. Suagee
for the conference
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Natural Resource Law Center, University of Colorado

There is an emerging consensus that dealing with global warming requires dramatic reductions in the emission of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, and that the most effective way of achieving reductions is a mix of solar and renewable energy technologies, in conjunction with major efforts to reduce waste through energy efficiency measures. The mix of strategies have been described as a collection of “wedges” on a graph between the line trending dramatically upward – showing projected emissions of carbon dioxide under a “business as usual” scenario – and a line trending back down to a level of emissions which, if we can get there, might limit the effects of global warming to something less than catastrophic. Many organizations and coalitions have released reports and plans with various amounts of detail on how we can get from where we are to where we need to be. For example, the American Solar Energy Society (ASES) suggests nine wedges: photovoltaics, concentrating solar power, wind, biomass, geothermal energy, transportation, biofuels, buildings, and energy efficiency. The various wedges can be described differently, with more or less nuance in the drawing distinctions, and there are some obvious overlaps among several of these wedges.

Most plans and reports that have been offered call for a mix of incentives for the private sector and legislation at federal, state, and local levels. Most plans and reports generally overlook possible roles for Indian tribal governments. This is an unfortunate oversight. Not only are tribal governments becoming part of the solution, through the exercise of their sovereign powers and through their ability to influence federal agency projects within their reservations, tribal governments have the potential to assume leading roles in moving us toward the renewable energy future that we need to realize.

This presentation will discuss some of the options available to tribes, suggestions for bringing tribal sovereignty to bear on each of the wedges identified by ASES. Observations will also be offered on potentials for inclusion of tribal governments in the plans and strategies being advanced by non-governmental organizations and business interest groups. In light of the scale of the challenge we face, the wide range of partial solutions represented by each wedge, the overlaps among the wedges, and the need to pursue all of these partial solutions at the same time, and soon, this new kind of wedge issue presents opportunities for alliances between people and groups that have not had much interaction with each other. Unlike the old kind of political wedge issue – issues that have been used to chip voting blocks away from the center – this new kind of wedge issue has the potential to bring people together working for mutual benefit, for the common good. Indian tribal governments, and the people who live in Indian country, need to be part of the solution, and people outside of Indian country can help to make this happen.