



The Environment-Economy Nexus

A Listening Session at the Environmental Council of States Spring Meeting

MARCH 2026 | SAVANNAH, GA

Hosted by the Heat Policy Innovation Hub

The Heat Policy Innovation Hub at Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment and Sustainability hosted a listening session at the Environmental Council of States spring meeting in Savannah, GA in March 2026, organized around the theme of the environment-economy nexus. Reid Wilson, Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality; Kristina Thayer, Director of the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment; and Kati Angarone, Senior Advisor at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, served as discussants. Terry Gray, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, moderated. State environmental officials from across the country joined the open exchange that followed.

Key Takeaways

The following key takeaways reflect perspectives shared by state-level environmental officials on how heat intersects with agency mandates, existing governance frameworks, and the practical realities of building policy responses with constrained data and authority.

States are governing heat through the authorities and funding they already have, not through heat-specific frameworks.

State resilience plans, hazard mitigation frameworks, climate funding streams, and occupational safety programs all carry heat work. At present, these existing pathways are the most viable mechanisms for progress on heat-related goals.

Heat is testing the core functions that environmental agencies manage.

Water quality, forestry stress, invasive species, post-disaster recovery, school infrastructure, and energy generation are all in the environmental management portfolio, and heat is showing up across each one. This is expanding the scope of challenges environmental governance must confront.

Nighttime heat has become the threshold that indicates systemic risk.

Participants highlighted high overnight temperatures as a key indicator that both people and infrastructure are struggling to recover. The focus on overnight minimums rather than only daytime peaks signals a shift in how leaders are thinking about the issue. Increased understanding of a range of heat metrics rather than a single metric (daytime peaks), as well as the geographic variance in heat profiles, and the multi-sectoral and economic impacts, is adding more nuance and breadth to leaders' understanding of the issue.

States are actively innovating heat governance independently, which threatens fragmentation.

Participants described action plan templates, scoring systems, dashboards, and heat mapping that other states want to adopt. States would benefit from more regional or federal mechanisms to facilitate interstate knowledge sharing. Without these mechanisms, products created across jurisdictional levels with little or no coordination will produce incompatible systems.

Advancing heat governance requires operational data.

Participants named specific data gaps tied to blocked action: sparse weather stations prevent local targeting, lack of air conditioning access data prevents household-level intervention, missing business data prevents advocates from making the economic case. States need specific data to direct investment toward the most effective interventions and make the case for continued investment.

Conclusion

The states in this session have built substantial capacity without dedicated legislation or federal coordination, finding opportunities to address the impacts of heat inside existing mandates and developing tools that are reaching people and informing decisions. This conversation surfaced and named specific data and governance gaps that would extend states' capacity to build heat resilience. Participants were ready to share methodologies and build on each other's work. With extreme heat challenges growing, now is the time for states to turn this momentum into collaborations that deliver actionable solutions.