ENERGYJUSTICE.net

U.S. CLIMATE LEGISLATION "WORSE THAN NOTHING"

why the leading climate policies are false solutions

In 2009, when climate bills were close to passing Congress, climate scientist Dr. Hansen stated that the legislation ("ACES") would be "worse for the environment than doing nothing." Greenpeace and others documented this in reports. Loophole-ridden, market-based false solutions must be opposed and we must demand far better. We don't have time to experiment with dirty and failed policies.

CAP AND TRADE: Most "climate" bills use "cap-and-trade" as their main way to "lower emissions." Cap and trade sets a "cap" on emissions from a wide range of polluting industries. Then pollution "permits" (rights to pollute) are either given away or auctioned. 2009 bills provided the majority of permits for free, a huge handout to corporate polluters. Companies that pollute below the cap level can sell their excess permits to those that pollute above the cap limit. Past attempts to use cap and trade have shown that it doesn't work, is easy to game, is subject to fraud, inhibits innovation, takes years to implement, and creates a huge risky market prone to manipulation! It also continues a trend of keeping pollution concentrated in poor and minority communities. In March 2011, after environmental justice groups challenged California's new cap-and-trade law, the courts suspended the law because the state rammed through a carbon trading system without considering policy alternatives (as required), such as those that would cause less harm to communities suffering from pollution hotspots.

"The fact is that the climate course set by Waxman-Markey is a disaster course. Their bill is an astoundingly inefficient way to get a tiny reduction of emissions. It's less than worthless, because it will delay by at least a decade starting on a path that is fundamentally sound from the standpoints of both economics and climate preservation."
-Dr. James Hansen. NASA Climate Scientist

When carbon trading critics point to Europe's clearly failed carbon trading system, proponents of trading claim that the sulfur dioxide (SO_2) trading program in the U.S. is a good example. However, the vast majority of the SO_2 reduction was accomplished by government-mandated limits before trading ever began. Once trading began, air pollution levels of SO_2, NOx, particulates and mercury *increased* in over 300 of the over 500 coal burning power plants in the U.S.

OFFSETS: Offsets allow industries to continue or increase pollution by paying others to reduce their emissions instead. Offsets do not reduce emissions, but (even without the prevalent fraud and loopholes) keep emissions the same by shifting them from one place to another. This could mean paying someone to plant trees, burn toxic landfill gases for energy, or do some other action that supposedly reduces emissions. Offsets are an imaginary commodity created by deducting what you hope happens from what you guess would have happened. It's usually impossible to verify real reductions, especially on agriculture and forestry-related projects. In some cases (like burning landfill gas or building a "less dirty than initially planned" new coal plant), offsets actually *increase* emissions, but creative accounting wins the day. The 2009 climate bills would have permitted over two billion tons of offsets, from anywhere in the world, creating a huge new market in a commodity that isn't objectively measurable. These offsets could enable polluters to avoid real reductions through 2029!

INADEQUATE TARGETS: Federal climate bills set absurdly inadequate targets for emissions reductions. The 2007 International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) asserted that more than 2 degrees Celsius of warming would be catastrophic (many scientists believe that even 1 or 1.5 degree warming would be catastrophic). To stay below 2 degrees, scientists have recommended that we keep atmospheric CO_2 levels below 350 parts per million (ppm). We are already at 387, and the impacts are alarming: melting ice, storms, droughts, ocean acidification, etc.

The U.N. Environment Program climate science update issued in Sept 2009 tells us that we are now on track for six degrees of warming by 2060-2070 (your lifetime?). That is a death sentence for most life on earth! And now for the scariest part: They told us that this significant global temperature rise is likely to occur even if industrialized and developed countries enacted every climate policy they had proposed at that point! The "ACES" bill passed by the House in 2009 sought to reduce emissions by a paltry 1% below 1990 levels by 2020. The Senate bill was similar. Even those weak ambitions were unlikely to be met, with so many offsets available. If we're to keep atmospheric CO_2 levels below 450 ppm, we must reduce emissions 25-40% below 1990 levels by 2020. This would provide only a 50% chance of remaining below 2 degrees of warming. The federal climate bills fell so far short that even if they passed, we're doomed to 6 degrees of warming!

STRIPPING EPA AUTHORITY TO REGULATE GREENHOUSE GASES: ACES only passed the House because it contained a provision that would strip the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) of its' hard-won authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act. That would remove one of our most powerful tools! Direct regulation by EPA would be far more effective than trading schemes, which is why the corporate-controlled House and Senate keep trying to kill EPA's authority, whether through a bogus "climate" bill or otherwise.

COAL IS A SOLUTION IN THE CLIMATE BILL?

Coal gets more subsidies in the climate bills than energy efficiency, wind, solar and geothermal combined, receiving tens of billions of dollars to become "clean" – as if that were even possible. Dirty energy industries are granted 9 times more pollution "allowances" than efficiency and renewables.

Climate bills provide massive funding for carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) – an untested, expensive, energy intensive, risky technology for capturing CO_2 from dirty polluting facilities (mainly coal) and pumping it underground. If it later leaks out, it will wreak havoc, potentially suffocating entire towns. CCS is the "darling" of dirty energy industries – enabling them to carry on with blasting the tops off of mountains in Appalachia and mining Canada's tar sands.

DON'T NUKE THE CLIMATE! Climate bills promote nuclear power as a solution to climate change. Even if nuclear power weren't terribly polluting, dangerous, racist, undemocratic and limited in potential, the fact that it's the most expensive (and most subsidized) form of energy – and slow to get built – means that we should stop wasting billions on it and put that money into what we know is safe, clean and quick to establish: conservation, efficiency, wind and solar. Nuclear power subsidies end up in climate and renewable energy bills of all sorts – even after Japan's multiple meltdowns at Fukushima Daiichi in March 2011.

"SOLUTIONS" DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD:

Climate bills provide massive financing for "dirty clean energy," which includes things like burning "biomass" (trees, crops, construction debris and various types of waste), natural gas, landfill gas and various types of biofuels. This is a recipe for deforestation, soil depletion and toxic air and water pollution. Some of these technologies release *more* global warming pollution than coal.

Natural gas (often described as 'clean') has lower emissions than coal when burned, but when the gas escapes before reaching a stove, heater or power plant, it is a potent greenhouse gas. Natural gas is primarily methane, which is 86-105 times more potent than CO_2 over 20 years. It is transported by a network of pipelines. Due to pipeline leakage and emissions from gas extraction, new research from Cornell University shows that natural gas is as bad or far worse than coal over a 20 year time frame, and only slightly better than coal over a 100-year time frame.

Landfill gas, when burned for electricity, releases 25 times more methane than a coal plant and up to 50% more CO_2, according to EPA data. This doesn't count the 80-90% of landfill gas (mostly methane and CO_2, plus hundreds of toxic contaminants) that is never captured. When landfills burn their gas to produce energy, they must be managed in ways that increase methane concentrations, but allow more gas to escape. This means that burning landfill gas releases 20-40% more greenhouse gas pollution than if the gas is just burned off without using it for energy.

Biomass is the incineration of anything from trash to trees, including poultry waste and chemically-treated wood. In addition to many problems with toxic air and water pollution, biotech use and other impacts, biomass incineration releases 50% more CO_2 than a coal power plant of the same size because it burns less efficiently. Burning of "biomass" is falsely counted as "carbon neutral." Biomass proponents claim that if you replant trees, then the trees reabsorb the CO_2 and it all balances out in the end. In reality, it takes too long for new trees to suck up the CO_2 and the atmosphere doesn't care where the extra burst of CO_2 came from. Short-term emissions are the most important if we are to avoid catastrophic climate change tipping points. After 40 years, the net GHG emissions from biomass burned for electricity are still worse than coal, even when considering forest regrowth. Only half of the CO_2 released today will be absorbed over the next 30 years and the rest will take up to thousands of years to remove from the atmosphere. Burning mature trees to replace them with seedlings is not a climate solution. Neither is burning trash.

FALSE VS. REAL POLICY SOLUTIONS With all of the loopholes factored in, the ACES bill's renewable energy requirement was less than 10% – far less than what would happen if Congress did nothing, since support for truly clean energy development from state laws and the private sector already surpasses the weak structure of incentives embedded in the national climate legislation.

WORST: Cap and trade with giveaways
AWFUL: Cap and trade with auction
BAD: Cap and trade with dividend ("cap and dividend")
BETTER: Carbon fee and rebate ("tax and dividend")
BEST: Mandated shift to clean solutions

Simply put, we were offered the worst option by Congress and it's not currently political possible to see a better bill pass. Environmental groups push for awful, bad or better, depending on the size of the group (bigger groups push for worse). We need the best if we're to truly solve things.

Auctioning pollution permits is better than giving them away to polluters, and a dividend or rebate (giving money back to low-income consumers in exchange for rising energy bills) is better than none, but a cap and trade policy will still fail to replace fossil fuel use with clean energy solutions. Many environmental groups prefer a carbon tax or fee, but this has two major problems: 1) it doesn't guarantee any specific reductions in a relevant time frame, and 2) by opposing just *part* of what falls on the dirty energy side of the energy spectrum, a carbon tax puts nuclear power, biomass incineration, and other false solutions (whose emissions are falsely assumed to be zero) at a competitive advantage – there is no guarantee that a carbon tax will move us to clean solutions rather than differently dirty false solutions.

A real global warming solution should look like this:

1) An Energy Efficiency Portfolio Standard that reduces energy demand by 75% in no more than 30 years, across all three energy sectors: transportation, heating and electricity.

2) A Clean Energy Portfolio Standard that meets the remaining energy needs with wind, solar and ocean power, coupled with energy storage, by 2030.

3) Shift the $74 billion in annual dirty energy subsidies plus at least half of the military budget (a major oil and gas subsidy) to clean solutions, making the above shift possible.

4) Set a national "zero waste" policy, starting with a national 75% waste reduction, recycling and composting goal. Minimizing waste can reduce 37% of U.S. GHG emissions

5) Adopt a climate-friendly sustainable agriculture program, focusing on making all food organic, localizing food production systems and getting people to eat lower on the food chain. This can reduce over 20% of GHG emissions.

And, finally:

0) Public campaign financing: As long as our politicians can legally be bribed by corporate interests, no real solutions will be "politically realistic." Clean energy needs clean elections!

Learn more at: www.energyjustice.net/climate/

Mike Ewall **215-436-9511** **www.energyjustice.net** **May 2015**