



The contrarian

How green hysteria will hit home

By Jon Entine in New York

If the 'progressives' get their way on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it will be ordinary Americans who suffer

Let's call it the black box syndrome: making revolutionary changes or new products without any real handle on what has actually been created or the potential impact. No-one really knew what the risks were when the wizards of Wall Street launched the inscrutable credit products that led to the current financial bubble that is now imploding, rocking the world economy.

Now we have something akin to that bubble building in the environmental arena, in the inflated rhetoric on global warming rising inexorably from the environmental-political complex. Global warming is a fact. The great questions are not whether the environment is gradually warming but whether it will persist and if so what can or should be done about it – and at what costs.

Alarmists-by-anecdote invoke Katrina, melting ice caps and death-by-heatstroke as signs of the end of the world as we know it. "It has been harder and harder to misinterpret the signs that our world is spinning out of kilter," Al Gore said last year in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize.

But the inconvenient truth is that we have just emerged from two of the calmest storm seasons on record and one of the coldest winters in decades. Of course, one year or even ten does not constitute a long-term trend, which is why the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change deploys the words "uncertain" or "uncertainty" more than 1,300 times in 900 pages.

Uncertainty aside, politics offers up the rhetoric of catastrophe and solutions. With the cognoscenti lambasting the US as the world's leading miscreant in the global warming arena, Republican presiden-

tial candidate John McCain says he would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 65 per cent by 2050, while the two Democrat contenders, Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton, embrace 80 per cent, in line with the demands of European activists.

Here's the environmental black box: considering the uncertainties voiced by the IPCC, should we embark on an immediate, drastic, and massively expensive reduction in greenhouse gas emissions? Are such goals even achievable, or might some of the most extreme efforts at reduction create a crisis of a different kind?

Prickly problems

To address these thorny issues, let us focus on the US. One recent projection from the liberal Clean Fuels Institute at City University in New York estimates it would cost, conservatively, \$6 trillion over the next 20 years to flatten greenhouse gases emissions in the US and tens of trillions more to meet the "progressive" targets over 40 years.

Compare those costs against the worst-case scenario of the credit meltdown. That might cost the financial system \$1 trillion, according to the International Monetary Fund – enough to raise legitimate worries about a worldwide depression. But those potential losses are only the tiniest fraction of the economic repercussions that would result from actually meeting the expected 2050 global warming targets.

Steven Hayward, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC, and an expert on environmental economics, is one of the few people who have actually crunched the

The Clean Fuels Institute estimates it would cost \$6 trillion over the next 20 years to flatten greenhouse gases emissions in the US

Number crunch

11 tons – CO₂ the average US home emits today.

1.5 tons – CO₂ the average US home would have to emit to meet 2050 targets.

Source: Steven Hayward, Index of Leading Environmental Indicators

numbers. In his recent annual “Index of Leading Environmental Indicators”, Hayward raises some “inconvenient truths”, as he likes to say, including putting in context the knee-jerk European belief that the US is a slacker in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The US starts from a higher base because of the longer transportation distances and larger homes (twice the size of the average European dwelling), but when these differences are normalised, American GHG emissions are in line with those of most European nations.

Because of accelerating conservation efforts, the US was the only industrialised country in which greenhouse gas emissions fell during the most recent year data is available, 2006. The 1.5 per cent reduction marked the first time emissions have ever fallen in a non-recessionary year. It also has the best record of restraining greenhouse gas emissions over the past eight years. While Kyoto-protocol participants increased 21.1 per cent, US emissions increased only 6.6 per cent.

But the most provocative part of Hayward’s report is when he takes the abstract costs to reduce GHG emissions and translates them into real life. How would Mom and Pop be affected if the “progressives” achieve their goal of an 80 per cent reduction? As Hayward notes, on average each person in the US generates almost 20 tonnes of CO₂ from fossil fuel usage. To give some idea of how radical an 80 per cent reduction would be, consider that Botswana, Haiti, and Somalia operate at that level today. It would entail turning back the per capita emissions output to 1875, when wood burning was a primary heat source.

What would such a reduction mean to the average homeowner? Each American home today produces over 11 tonnes of emissions per year. To meet the 2050 target, Hayward figures each household could emit 1.5 tonnes of CO₂. That’s more than the average family emits using just one appliance – their hot water heater. Forget such “luxuries” as a refrigerator, freezer, washer and dryer, let alone a flat-screen TV.

GDP drop

The transportation sector would get creamed. That SUV or visiting the relatives in California? Forget it. Today’s consumption of jet fuel alone accounts for two-thirds of the 2050 target. Hayward notes that the last time the transportation infrastructure operated at the target consumption level was during the 1920s, when commercial air travel was negligible and there were 26 million cars and trucks – compared with more than 246 million today. Hayward says: “If the entire auto industry today matched the performance of today’s Toyota Prius, CO₂ emissions would be ... 40 per cent higher than the 2050 emissions target.”

What would be the overall impact on the economy of meeting the radical reduction targets? In March, the US Environmental Protection Agency



Learn from the Dutch

released its analysis of the proposed Lieberman-Warner Environmental Security Act, which is designed to reduce emissions by 70 per cent by 2050. It projects that GDP could drop 2.7 per cent, which would be far worse than the current financial crisis, but that’s at a minimum. It projected GDP could very well fall a catastrophic 10.1 per cent – setting back the standard of living in the US and the world by decades.

The respected strategists Robert Socolow and Stephen Pacala of Princeton University, in their well-received report on seven aggressive “stabilisation wedge” energy strategies, argued that it would take enormous, and politically unacceptable, sacrifices to just hold CO₂ emissions steady. In short, the 2050 targets are both absurd and irresponsible.

Without radical breakthroughs in geo-engineering through, say, injecting high altitude sulphate particles in the atmosphere, we are going to have to focus our limited economic resources on adaptation. That could mean everything from trying to develop GM crops that use less water to designing waterfront systems that protect against rising waters, structures pioneered years ago by the Dutch, rather than setting pie-in-the-sky GHG reduction targets.

“It’s crying wolf,” says Hayward on the projections of catastrophic climate change and the calls for a dramatic overhaul of society to address these projections. “Even if they are right, they are squandering their moral authority. If you’re looking for technological solutions instead of exaggeration, sadly you won’t find it in most discussions about climate change.”

Let’s hope the air continues to leak out of the climate change hysteria bubble, and the quicker the better. ■

An 80 per cent reduction would entail turning back the per capita emissions output to 1875

Jon Entine is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC and senior counsellor for sustainability at Cincinnati-based Northlich. runjonrun@earthlink.com
www.jonentine.com