

U.S. must act on climate change – the world can't wait any longer

Marshall Saunders, Sacramento Bee, 12-10-10

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If the climate change talks in Cancún are lumbering toward an anticlimax, it isn't for lack of urgency.

A report released at the U.N. conference a week ago warns that by 2030 climate change will indirectly cause nearly 1 million deaths a year as well as \$157 billion in damage. The greatest impact will be borne by the world's poorest nations, which have contributed least to the greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the planet.

Looking at a future with 9 billion people to feed by midcentury, other reports point to the impact of climate change on food supplies. A study from the U.N. Environmental Program shows that increasing acidification in oceans – caused by higher levels of carbon dioxide – will make it difficult for coral and shellfish to survive, risking a collapse of the food chain that nourishes a billion people.

A report from the International Food Policy Research Institute finds that on current trajectories, climate change will cause food prices to double by 2050, putting millions of the poor at risk of hunger and starvation.

With dire assessments like these coming at us almost daily, why haven't the nations of the world agreed upon a strategy to reduce the threat caused by heat-trapping gases?

The elephant in the room now blocking progress is the United States.

Congress adjourns this month, failing once again to enact legislation that would put a price on carbon and speed the transition to a clean-energy economy. With politicians watching the unemployment rate as though it were our nation's heart monitor, you'd think they would jump at the chance to fashion a policy that will create and sustain millions of new jobs well into the century.

A report recently published by Citizens Climate Lobby, "Building the Green Economy," concludes that moving away from fossil fuels and toward solutions like solar and wind will result in a net increase of jobs. In one example, the Department of Energy estimates that if 20 percent of our power is derived from wind energy, 500,000 jobs would be created, dwarfing the 174,000 jobs supported by the coal industry.

So what are the chances of the next Congress passing climate and energy legislation? Beltway pundits tell us those odds are slim and none. November's election shifted control of the U.S. House of Representatives to the Republicans, many of whom are self-avowed climate change skeptics.

The deck is further stacked by the fact that more than 150 members of the House have signed the "No Climate Tax" pledge being circulated by Americans for Prosperity, an organization funded by oil conglomerate Koch Industries (you may remember them from the Proposition 23 campaign). Seven members of the California congressional delegation have signed the pledge – Wally Herger, Tom McClintock, George Radanovich, Kevin McCarthy, Gary Miller, John Campbell and Jeff Denham (newly elected).

While this doesn't bode well, the precise wording of the pledge leaves open the possibility of signers supporting the right kind of climate and energy bill:

"I, (NAME), pledge to the taxpayers of the state of (STATE NAME) and to the American people that I will oppose any legislation relating to climate change that includes a net increase in government revenue."

The cap-and-trade proposals considered in this Congress would certainly break that pledge. They would have taken in vast amounts of revenue from the sale of carbon permits and spent the money on a plethora of monitoring and incentives programs.

There is, however, an approach to pricing carbon that does not include "a net increase in government revenue": carbon fee and dividend. It works by placing a steadily rising fee on carbon-based fuels at the source – well, mine, port of entry – such that fossil fuels become more expensive than clean energy within a decade.

All the revenue is then returned to the public, preferably in the form of equal monthly payments. It won't increase the size of government – a big plus from the Republican perspective – and it gives Americans the extra money they need to cover rising energy costs associated with the carbon fee.

It also provides the clear price signal for investors who are waiting for some assurance that betting on wind, solar and other forms of clean energy will pay off in the future. That kind of confidence means that wind farms and solar arrays will eventually replace the smoke stacks of coal-burning power plants.

It's a solution that both sides of the political aisle should be able to agree upon. Based on what we're seeing out of Cancún, we simply can't wait another two years to put the brakes on climate change.