

Column / Judgment Calls

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Charles Ommanney for NEWSWEEK

Global Warming and Hot Air

From politicians to the corporate world, everyone's talking about saving the planet from disastrous climate change. But for now, it's just talk.

Feb. 7, 2007 - You could be excused for thinking that we'll soon do something serious about global warming. Last Friday, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—an international group of scientists—concluded that, to a 90 percent probability, human activity is warming the Earth. Earlier, Democratic congressional leaders made global warming legislation a top priority; and 10 big U.S. companies (including General Electric and DuPont) endorsed federal regulation. Strong action seems at hand.

Don't be fooled. The dirty secret about global warming is this: We have no solution. About 80 percent of the world's energy comes from fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas), the main sources of man-made greenhouse gases. Energy use sustains economic growth, which—in all modern societies—buttresses political and social stability. Until we can replace fossil fuels or find practical ways to capture their emissions, governments will not sanction the deep energy cuts that would truly affect global warming.

Considering this reality, you should treat the pious exhortations to "do something" with skepticism, disbelief or contempt. These pronouncements are (take your pick) naive, self-interested, misinformed, stupid or dishonest. Politicians mainly want to be seen as reducing global warming. Companies want to polish their images and exploit markets created by new environmental regulations. As for editorialists and pundits, there's no explanation except superficiality or herd behavior.

Anyone who honestly examines global energy trends must reach these harsh conclusions. In 2004, world emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂, the main greenhouse gas) totaled 26 billion metric tons. Under plausible economic and population assumptions, CO₂ emissions will grow to 40 billion tons by 2030, projects the International Energy Agency. About three-quarters of the increase is forecast to come from developing countries, two-fifths from China alone. The IEA expects China to pass the United States as the largest source of carbon dioxide by 2009.

Poor countries won't sacrifice economic growth—lowering poverty, fostering political stability—to placate the rich world's global warming fears. Why should they? On a per-person basis, their carbon dioxide emissions are only about one-fifth the level of rich countries. In Africa, less than 40 percent of the population even has electricity.

Nor will existing technologies, aggressively deployed, rescue us. The IEA studied an "alternative scenario" that simulated the effect of 1,400 policies to reduce fossil fuel use. Fuel economy for new U.S. vehicles was assumed to increase 30 percent by 2030; the global share of energy from "renewables" (solar, wind, hydropower, biomass) would quadruple, to 8 percent. The result: by 2030, annual carbon dioxide emissions would rise 31 percent instead of 55 percent. The concentration levels of emissions in the atmosphere (which presumably cause warming) would rise.

Since 1850, global temperatures have increased almost 1 degree Celsius. Sea level has risen about seven inches, though the connection is unclear. So far, global warming has been a change, not a calamity. The IPCC projects wide ranges for the next century: temperature increases from 1.1 degrees Celsius to 6.4 degrees; sea level rises from seven inches to almost two feet. People might easily adapt; or there might be costly disruptions (say, frequent flooding of coastal cities resulting from melting polar ice caps).

I do not say we should do nothing, but we should not delude ourselves. In the United States, the favored remedy is "cap and trade." It's environmental grandstanding—politicians pretending they're doing something.

Companies would receive or buy quotas ("caps") to emit carbon dioxide. To exceed the limits, they'd acquire some other company's unused quotas ("trade"). How simple. Just order companies to cut emissions. Businesses absorb all the costs.

But in practice, no plausible "cap and trade" program would significantly curb global warming. To do that, quotas would have to be set so low as to shut down the economy.

Or the cost of scarce quotas would skyrocket and be passed along to consumers through much higher energy prices. Neither outcome seems likely. Quotas would be lax. The program would be a regulatory burden with little benefit. It would also be a bonanza for lobbyists, lawyers and consultants, as industries and localities besieged Washington for exceptions and special treatment. Hello, influence-peddling and sleaze.

What we really need is a more urgent program of research and development, focusing on nuclear power, electric batteries, alternative fuels and the capture of carbon dioxide. Naturally, there's no guarantee that socially acceptable and cost-competitive technologies will result. But without them, global warming is more or less on automatic pilot. Only new technologies would enable countries—rich and poor—to reconcile the immediate imperative of economic growth with the potential hazards of climate change.

Meanwhile, we could temper our energy appetite. I've argued before for a high oil tax to prod Americans to buy more fuel-efficient vehicles. The main aim would be to limit insecure oil imports, but it would also check CO₂ emissions. Similarly, we might be better off shifting some of the tax burden from wages and profits to a broader tax on energy or carbon. That would favor more fuel-efficient light bulbs, appliances and industrial processes.

It's a debate we ought to have — but probably won't. Any realistic response would be costly, uncertain and no doubt unpopular. That's one truth too inconvenient for almost anyone to admit.