

US CLIMATE LEGISLATION “WORSE THAN NOTHING” WE SHOULD OPPOSE IT AND DEMAND FAR BETTER!

Climate scientist, Dr. James Hansen stated that the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES), would be “worse for the environment than doing nothing.” The recently released draft Senate bill, the “Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act” is no improvement. These bills should be opposed, and we should demand policy makers come up with something far, FAR better. Why?

Because if dirty and ineffective law is passed, we will be stuck with it, under the guise of “doing something” about climate change, and our opportunity to enact real solutions will be delayed for longer than climate scientists tell us we have to initiate effective actions.

CAP AND TRADE: Both 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. Both bills provide 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!

When carbon trading critics point to Europe’s clearly failed carbon trading system, proponents of trading claim that the sulfur dioxide (SO₂) trading program in the U.S. is a good example. However, the vast majority of the SO₂ reduction was accomplished by government-mandated limits before trading ever began. Once trading began, air pollution levels of SO₂, NO_x, 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 climate bills would permit over two billion tons of offsets, which can come 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! Not funny! But this short spoof from Greenpeace is: www.thecroc.org

INADEQUATE TARGETS: Both bills set absurdly inadequate targets for emissions reductions. 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 CO₂ 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 just released a climate science update in Sept 2009. They tell 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 tell us that this significant global temperature rise is likely to occur even if industrialized and developed countries enact every climate policy they have proposed at this point! ACES would seek to reduce emissions by a paltry 1% below 1990 levels by 2020. The Senate bill is little different. And even those weak ambitions are unlikely to be met, with so many offsets available. If we’re to keep atmospheric CO₂ 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 fall so far short that even if they pass, we’re doomed to 6 degrees of warming!

STRIPPING EPA AUTHORITY TO REGULATE GREENHOUSE GASES: ACES 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 a trading scheme. The Senate version would only ban EPA authority to regulate certain waste and agriculture industries until 2020, but it’s expected that the Senate will adopt the House version’s full ban to win votes for passage.

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.

Both bills would provide massive funding for carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) – an untested, expensive, energy intensive, risky technology for capturing CO₂ 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! The 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. The climate bills are likely to be amended to be far more nuclear-friendly than they already are.

“SOLUTIONS” DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD:

Both 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 25 times more potent than CO₂. It is transported by a network of pipelines. If only 2% of the gas moving through pipelines leaks, the effect on climate change is thought to be equal to that of burning coal. Experts say that 3-5% loss in transmission is normal, and up to 20% is known to happen.

Landfill gas, when burned for electricity, releases 25 times more methane than a coal plant and up to 50% more CO₂, according to EPA data. This doesn't count the 80-90% of landfill gas (mostly methane and CO₂, 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 1.5 to 3.2 times more CO₂ than a coal power plant of the same size because it burns less efficiently. Burning of “biomass” is falsely counted as “carbon neutral” and “renewable.” Biomass proponents claim that if you replant trees, then the trees reabsorb the CO₂ and it all balances out in the end. In reality, it'll take too long for new trees to suck up the CO₂ and the atmosphere doesn't care where the extra burst of CO₂ came from. Short-term emissions are the most important if we are to avoid catastrophic climate change tipping points. EPA's April 2009 Endangerment Finding states that only half of the CO₂ released today will be absorbed over the next 30 years and that the rest will take thousands of years to remove from the atmosphere. The latest science shows that most species of newly-planted trees are actually carbon emitters for the first 10-20 years and don't become effective at carbon sequestration until they are mature. Burning mature trees to replace them with seedlings is not a climate solution. Neither is burning trash.

Rachel Smolker and Mike Ewall

climate@energyjustice.net

FALSE VS. REAL POLICY SOLUTIONS With all of the loopholes factored in, the ACES bill's renewable energy requirement is 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're being 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 50% in 20-30 years, across all three energy sectors: transportation, heating and electricity.

2) A Clean Energy Portfolio Standard that meets the demands of the other 50% with wind, solar and ocean power (and perhaps some small-scale micro hydro or closed-loop geothermal) within the same time frame.

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/

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