

Unleashing Optimism

“We have before us an extraordinary opportunity: to harness the power of the United States of America’s huge and dynamic markets to ensure a safe future...Enacting a cap on carbon will gather U.S. ingenuity and resourcefulness to serve a higher purpose: protecting this planet for generations to come. We have the talent and a brief window of time to create the world of possibilities. All we need is resolve.”

Fred Krupp, President of Environmental Defense Fund, and Miriam Horn, in Earth: The Sequel.

“Things are going to work out - I’m optimistic.” I must have been looking depressed - out of the blue, a good friend tried to reassure me recently that solutions really are being found for rapid climate challenge. He didn’t have to convince me - I agree. Prospects are looking much better than they were this time last year. I’ve been reading about all sorts of wonderful solutions lately – from microbes that produce energy out of waste, to untapped geothermal resources in Alaska, to progress in solar cell efficiency, to the development of plug-in hybrids, and rapid growth of building energy efficiency. The recent book “Earth: The Sequel, the Race to Reinvent Energy and Stop Global Warming” is a catalogue of hopeful technological advances. I’ve always felt that once climate change was acknowledged as really happening, and our innovative energy was turned to solving the issue, solutions would be found. However if those ideas lack funding, or have to compete with heavily subsidized traditional alternatives, they’ll stay in the lab. As Krupp says, now is the time to remove impediments, and unleash the market to bring them to scale.

What are the impediments? Massive subsidies to the fossil fuel industry, for one. By masking the real cost of fossil fuels with subsidies, they are being given an unfair market advantage over other energy sources. By disowning the cost to civilization of carbon emissions, the fossil fuel industry keeps carbon-emitting energy cheap on the surface, while extraordinarily costly to our civilization as it tries to deal with the ramifications of climate change. Alternative energy systems, which do not emit carbon and currently are not subsidized, need a level playing field in order to be competitive.

Legislation controlling utilities can also help. Ohio, this week, is joining the 25 other states who have a renewable or advanced energy portfolio requirement for their utilities. This is a good start. It will require that 25% of the energy mix in Ohio be generated from “advanced energy” by 2025, with half of that from renewable energy. Look for incentives and programs from the utilities to help homeowners and businesses lower their electricity and natural gas usage. Hopefully this will lend support to the green industrial revolution in Ohio. However, to meet the urgency of the climate challenge, we will need to do even better.

Cap and Trade is a concept which has been successful in the past. This system of capping allowable emissions, and then auctioning tradable carbon permits, has been successful in reducing acid-rain-causing pollutants. A limit is set on emissions and slowly lowered over time, while permits to emit carbon may be sold by those companies that don’t need them, to those who do. In this way, a price is put on carbon, and an incentive is given to innovate. Several Cap and Trade systems for carbon emissions are already in place around the country; the western,

Midwestern, and Northeastern states each have a separate Cap and Trade or carbon-reduction system. The UK is involved with the western group, and this week, it was announced that a city in China is actually joining with the Midwestern market! (Hopefully this is a sign of things to come...) So 23 of our 50 states, as well as Ontario and Quebec in Canada, are already involved in a cap and trade market or have initiated carbon reduction plans. Nine other states, including Ohio, are official observers who are contemplating joining. If they would join, we'd have a majority of the country in cap and trade.

The U.S. Congress is currently working out the details of the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act to provide a much-needed uniform Cap and Trade system for our country. But will it be signed by the White House? Judging from President Bush's speech last week, it's not likely. He doesn't seem to sense the urgency, unlike the U.S. Climate Action Partnership, a formidable group of business multi-nationals, including General Electric and Ford, energy companies, and NGO's who have stated that "Cap and Trade is essential." Fortunately, the next administration will likely sign the legislation, but more time will be lost...and we are short on time.

Cap and trade would unleash the market, and provide the level playing field that alternative energy solutions need in order to be brought to scale. Now would be a good time to contact your representatives about supporting this bill, and to contact the White House about signing it. Our optimism depends on it.

Check it Out:

Earth: The Sequel, The Race to Reinvent Energy and Stop Global Warming, by Fred Krupp, President of the Environmental Defense Fund, and Miriam Horn.

The Pew Center on Global Climate Change, Cap and Trade 101:
<http://www.pewclimate.org/cap-trade>

The Pew Center on Global Climate Change, States regional initiatives:
http://www.pewclimate.org/what_s_being_done/in_the_states/regional_initiatives.cfm

U.S. Climate Action Partnership report: "A Call for Action: Consensus Principles and Recommendations" Some of the businesses involved: Alcoa, Chrysler, General Electric, BP, Shell, Duke Energy, DuPont, Ford, etc. <http://www.pewclimate.org/uscap.cfm>

Contact the White House, or your representatives: <http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml>