

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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We Need Better Regulations to Control Global Warming

I am sure you have read, heard or seen many discussions on climate change – or global warming. The vast majority of climate change experts say that global warming is real, it is anthropogenic, and it needs to be curtailed.

The first major attempt to reduce the emission of green house gases (GHG), like carbon dioxide, was the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, and as of January 2009 it has been ratified by 183 countries. This agreement actually came into force in February 2005 and calls for an average reduction of 5.2% from 1990 GHG levels by 2012. The United States was one of a few countries that never ratified this agreement although it did sign it as a symbolic gesture.

Since the Kyoto Protocol actually expires in 2012, something needs to be done beyond that date. Consequently, the next major meeting of the major polluting countries will take place in December 2009 in Copenhagen. At the time of the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. was the largest emitter of GHG in the world, but the Bush administration did not succumb to pressure to ratify the agreement. Although the U.S. is now only the second largest emitter (China is number one), it must take a leadership position to help reduce the emission of GHG.

When the U.S. goes to the meeting, it will probably have passed the “The American Clean Energy and Security Act”, better known as the Waxman-Markey bill, which is currently in Congress. At the time of this writing, the House has passed the bill and it is now in the Senate. This bill represents the beginning of an effort to reduce GHG emissions, but it is not enough. The goals for U.S. emission reductions below 2005 levels are a 3% cut by 2012, 17% cut by 2020, 42% cut by 2030 and more than 80% by 2050. Scientists state that an atmospheric concentration of 350 parts per million of CO₂ is the upper limit for a stable climate; yet this bill aims for 450. In addition, the international community is calling for cuts of 25 to 40% below 1990 levels by 2020, while this bill aims for only 4%. The Kyoto Protocol was designed to reduce emissions below the 1990 levels while the U.S. is now talking about reducing them below 2005 levels – a big difference.

Another provision of the bill is for regulated industries to acquire permits for their emissions. Emission permits are also referred to as “carbon credits”, “pollutions allowances”, and various combinations of these words. If a company cuts its emissions so much that it has more permits than it needs, it can sell excess permits to other companies or bank them for future use. If a company doesn't have enough permits, it can buy more or borrow its future credits and pay interest on them. This is fine except 85% of the emission permits would be given away free at the start of the program, with the percentage decreasing over time. The remaining 15% would be auctioned off. I believe that all of the permits should be auctioned off from the beginning, and would appear simply as a carbon tax. The tax should be passed on to the citizens as an

added cost, and the proceeds of the tax should be distributed back to the U.S. citizens as a dividend, not a tax credit. Consequently, the people that become more energy efficient would come out ahead.

In addition to the emission permits, the bill also provides for the purchase of two billion tons of offsets that could be used by a company to meet its emission reductions. This represents a massive loophole that will allow polluters to meet their carbon reduction obligation by paying someone else to pollute. In November 10, 2008, Barack Obama gave his first speech on climate change as the president and said, "Now is the time to confront this challenge once and for all. Delay is no longer an option." Full use of the offsets in the current climate bill would allow polluters to avoid reducing their emissions until 2026.

Waiting to correct the problem in 2050 will make it much more difficult to dig out of this problem. As James Hansen, regarded as the top U.S. climate scientist, has often said, to begin to fix the climate then will no longer be possible, since it's barely still possible today. We need a bill that more closely approximates the Kyoto Protocol which calls for reducing emissions from 1990 levels, not 2005 levels.