

CLIMATE TALK

Making Sense of Climate Change News

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Did you read the Ashland Daily Press last December 26th? Me neither, I think Christmas got in the way. I found out later that Bill Bussey had written a great “Climate Talk” that was printed that day. In case you missed it, he summed up all the great things that are happening to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in hopes of slowing climate change: extensions of tax credits, the United Nations Climate Change agreement (COP21) in Paris, Bill Gates et al funding a research and development fund, and many corporations, cities, counties, and states committing to reduce their carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. It’s quite an amazing list in an amazing time. Something to cheer about, as Bill would say. If you missed the December Climate Talk you can check it out at www.CheqBayRenewables.org in the news tab.

Since then I have read reports and analyses that seem to contradict this good news. Computer models have been developed to predict global temperatures when variables like CO₂ emissions are considered. These models, two of which are called MAGICC and C-ROADS, are hard pressed to chart a significant reduction in the rate of increase of global temperatures if the COP21 plan is followed. So which is it? If we adhere to the COP21 agreement are temperatures going to keep going up or not?

The short answer is yes, they are going to keep going up even if we all stick to the COP21 agreement. The momentum is too much to stop it. The real question is how much? The goal of COP21 is no more than a 2 degree Celsius rise with a hope of keeping it even lower to only a 1.5 deg rise. The computer models predict, however, between 3.5 deg (C-ROADS) to 4.5 deg (MAGICC) by 2100, even if all the countries adhere to the COP21 pledges. One might wonder “Why we are cheering about COP21?”, right?

The COP21 agreement has more to it than just the current commitments. It comes with a review process every 5 years where they can up the ante. They called it a “ratchet”. Everyone needs to see if they can tighten the emissions up a bit, in other words reduce them more. It is going to take 3 or 4 “ratchets” to achieve only a 1 ½ to 2 degree temperature rise. The computer models are based on the COP21 current commitments with no ratcheting system considered. They assume in 2030 all belt tightening stops and everything, in terms of emissions, keeps chugging along until 2100. That is why the two seem so far apart.

The important point here is that plans like the Clean Power Plan (CPP) put out by the EPA to control CO₂ emissions from power plants is not the end game. It’s just the beginning. There are a number of people complaining that the CPP would hurt the middle class by raising electric rates and kill job growth. There couldn’t be anything further from the truth. The switch away from fossil fuels will spur economic development, creating local jobs. The solar industry alone employed more than 200,000 people in 2015, a 20% increase from the previous year, and a 123% increase since 2010. By comparison all the gas and oil extraction jobs in the U.S were 185,000 in December of 2015. A conscious effort to expand renewable energy will create even more jobs. Shutting coal plants won’t necessarily raise electric rates either. Most of the dirtiest coal plants

have already been shut down, with no ill effects on electric rates. Renewables are now economically competitive, so any new generation from renewables will not raise rates. But consider this: what if the benefits from renewables, and also the detriments from air pollution were included when figuring out the price of electricity. What do you think would happen to your rates then?

The CPP's goal is to achieve a 32% overall reduction of CO2 from power plants from the 2005 baseline by 2030. After that there needs to be a new plan to further reduce (ratchet 1). To date, power plants have already reduced emissions by 36% from 2005 levels. It's not hard to imagine further reduction because many market forces are driving things in that direction. Momentum from things like the investment tax credit and production tax credit, the positive economics of renewable energy, and existing regulations that are in place like the Mercury and Air Toxic Standards (MATS) are driving the utility industry away from coal.

Oregon is our most recent example of state policy that is reducing CO2 emissions by phasing out all coal from its energy mix by 2035. Although the Supreme Court recently put a stay on the CPP, delaying enforcement until the lower courts have ruled, the outcome from the courts is not paramount to success. Economics, consumer demand, and other sound policies are moving the county toward clean energy.

One technique that has been introduced to really "ratchet" things up is to put a fee on carbon and return those proceeds to the public. This is a bipartisan approach because it is market driven and tax neutral. Studies have been done including the Regional Economics Model Inc (REMI) report which confirms this method would spur economic activity while reducing emissions. The Citizens Climate Lobby is one organization promoting this approach. Find out more by visiting the local chapter's Face Book page, Chequamegon Citizens Climate Lobby.

We're making great strides in combating climate change. To get virtually all the countries in the world to agree on anything is unprecedented. Let's take that momentum and run with it!

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