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Why Are Carbon Emissions Up?

Green subsidies aren't working when CO2 is growing faster than energy consumption.



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Hooray, the climate problem is solved. At least if the new spending estimates under Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act are matched by similar expected declines in emissions.

The estimated spending has tripled, to \$1.2 trillion, so the estimated benefits must have tripled too. Instead of a 40% drop, U.S. emissions will be down 120%. We'll be sucking CO2 out of the air.

I'm joking, of course, but so were the original estimates by three private groups touted last year by the White House. All three ignored the price effect: When certain consumers are subsidized to use less fossil energy, others in the U.S. and world will take advantage of lower prices to consume more.

One outfit, the Rhodium Group, lamely said it was putting off consideration of such "energy system outcomes" for a future "deeper dive." Another, EnergyInnovation.org, lost itself in the weeds of Mr. Biden's domestic oil and gas leasing policies.

Least dishonest was the Princeton University-connected REPEAT Project. It omitted the effect of lower fuel prices on emissions but included them as a side benefit for fossil-fuel consumers. (If the person reading over your shoulder is cackling, she's an economist.)

Even the White House Office of Management and Budget couldn't conceal a guilty conscience. In trumpeting the private studies, it noted that "complicated economic interactions" might affect "real-world" emissions.

How are Americans supposed to evaluate the policies of their government if even supposedly independent private analysts enlist in the cause of propaganda?

Good question.

Meanwhile, a censorious report on National Public Radio, citing a poll, accuses Republican voters of being content to “do nothing” about climate change. In fact, neither party proposes to do anything about climate change. Democrats propose to spend a lot more money doing nothing.

It helps to be realistic about our energy economy, including the term “alternative” energy. As much wood is burned in the U.S. today as in 1885, when coal surpassed it to become our largest energy source. Wind and hydropower were in use centuries before fossil fuels arrived and never stopped growing. Solar voltaic has grown like topsy since its invention in the 1950s.

There’s only “additional” energy and no upward limit on humanity’s willingness to consume it except through the workings of price. If energy were cheap enough, we’d have flying cars, supersonic airlines and space travel for the middle class. You would open your windows in the winter to enjoy the benefit of fresh air and heat at the same time. Energy is convenience. Energy is control over our environment. Humans will consume all the energy it makes sense to consume at the available price.

When President Obama launched today’s worldwide gush of green-energy subsidies in 2009, his allies in Congress added financing for a National Academy of Sciences study, which would later conclude, at a length of 198 pages, that such subsidies were a “poor tool for reducing greenhouse gases and achieving climate-change objectives.”

The numbers bear this out. Worldwide investment in renewable energy, by some dubious measures, has exceeded investment in fossil fuels in recent years, yet this merely testifies to how inefficient such investments are in producing energy output. Cut to the chase: global CO₂ emissions actually grew 12% faster in 2022 than energy consumption did.

With deployments goosed by Obama-like handouts around the world, wind and solar still accounted for less than 2.4% of humanity’s total energy consumption. Their annual increase was still a small fraction of the annual increase in fossil-fuel consumption. They remain functionally additive to humanity’s energy budget. rather than displacing coal or oil on a global basis.

I've referred in the past to the problem of "sophisticated state failure." Miracles can't be expected, but there's no reason democratic societies can't improve their ability to address complex problems. Needed is a news media able to think and communicate in multi-variable terms rather than single-variable terms (e.g., green energy = good).

In the absence of a carbon tax, green-energy subsidies mainly stimulate more energy consumption overall. In the presence of a carbon tax, they're redundant and make carbon-saving decisions less efficient than they would otherwise be.

This isn't hard but it's too hard for today's media, and the output is Team Biden's Inflation Reduction Act.

At least one honest climate advocate works in the administration—whoever was responsible for its recent endorsement of research into geoengineering. The idea here is to inject particles into the atmosphere to slow warming even as our green subsidies uselessly accumulate in the pockets of green-energy lobbyists like Al Gore.

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