



\$4.00 per Gallon Gasoline and Climate Change Both Call for the Same Solution: Collective Investment in Clean Energy

Elizabeth R. Sawin, June 11, 2008

"What do you have to say about global warming to the whole segment of Americans who are just waking up to energy issues with \$4.00 per gallon gasoline?"

That question came from the audience during a workshop on climate change I led recently.

There is an assumption behind this question, one that seemed to be everywhere I turned last week – in the press, on talk radio, and even on the floor of the US Senate. The assumption goes like this: now that energy prices are rising we can't afford to charge the costs of greenhouse gas pollution because that would place an unacceptable burden on people already struggling to meet high energy costs.

That was Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell's argument in the debate leading up to the defeat of the Climate Security Act last week. "At a time when the economy is struggling, when the price of gas, food and power bills are skyrocketing, this giant tax would be an unbearable new burden for Americans."

The tax McConnell refers to is the cap and trade system the bill proposed, which would have given companies financial incentive to reduce their global warming pollution.

Any economist will tell you that markets only serve us when they include all the costs of a good or service. We are on the edge of climate catastrophe because our energy markets have failed us in the past. They have not charged the costs of preventing climate change or the costs of

repairing the damage it causes. This failure might have been understandable in the days before the scientific consensus that climate change is real and that human greenhouse gas production is its cause. But today leading climate scientists are telling us that we have already exceeded safe levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Knowing what we know and allowing our energy markets to favor oil, coal, and natural gas over clean alternatives is like knowing that tobacco causes lung cancer and promoting smoking in public buildings.

The Climate Security act – while not going far enough to ensure a safe climate – would have been a first step towards correcting this failure of our energy markets by rewarding those industries and technologies that deliver more of what people need with less greenhouse gas pollution.

Senator McConnell implied a conflict between the interests of ordinary people and the opportunity to fix this market failure, a conflict between our daily needs and the requirements of the biosphere that is the ultimate provider for those needs. Fortunately for us, McConnell and those he speaks for put forth a false choice.

Americans don't "need" cheap gas and electricity. We need only what they have come to provide – affordable, convenient ways to get to work in the morning, ways to get around our communities, access to food we can afford that is good for our bodies and our children, homes that are comfortable, activities that interest us and make a difference.

In most communities in America it is hard to meet these needs without using fossil fuels, lots of them. That is not the result of any inherent American need for fossil energy but because we are still trying to get by in a society that has not invested in an infrastructure for meeting needs in other ways. Most of our cities and towns are still waiting for safe bike lanes, walkable neighborhoods, sustainable farms, clean efficient train systems, distributed electricity generation from solar and wind, super-efficient appliances, and revitalized local economies. Those alternatives could help us meet our daily needs while respecting our other needs because we also need sea levels that don't inundate our cities, drinking water that doesn't dry up in droughts, weather systems that don't produce deadly storms, and a climate suitable for growing our staple crops.

The incentives of the Climate Security Act would have helped create the clean energy

economy we need. For those burdened citizens to whom McConnell refers so passionately the legislation's defeat means a prolonged period of burden, a longer wait for the emergence of alternatives. New legislation with the potential to jump-start a clean energy economy will not be considered until after the next President is elected. Meanwhile fossil energy prices appear likely to stay high and we still lack a coherent national plan that offers ways to get to work or school, heat our homes and feed our families without costing more than we or the only planet we will ever have can afford to pay.

It's enough to make you wonder how deeply Senator McConnell is worried about my family's challenges, or yours, and whether or not his deeper concern might lie with the needs of the fossil fuel industry, which, rumor has it, is still a powerful force in his home state of Kentucky and in Washington D.C.

Elizabeth R. Sawin is the Co-Director of Sustainability Institute's Our Climate Ourselves program; more columns like this one can be found at OurClimateOurselves.org/oco-writings

Beth is a writer, teacher, and systems thinker who lives with her family as part of an intentional community and organic farm in Hartland, Vermont. To be placed on mailing list that will inform you of new columns, sign up at OurClimateOurselves.org/oco-news

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