Climate Destroyers and Earthlings Clash over BAU (business as usual)

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Critical Comment

Culture Change Letter #232 - Dinosaurs are telling us we all have to die for them. Two historic news stories early this week underscored the clash between (A) defending corporate profits and the U.S. drive-by lifestyle and (B) actually trying to save the climate. In my town, the newspaper ironically put the former story on the top, with the latter right underneath -- the way a rape victim is underneath. Neither of the stories was page-one news, even though the readers were being hit with the major confirmation that CO2 buildup is "irreversible."

The top article was "Geography Is Dividing Democrats Over Energy", a New York Times report by John Broder. In it the most important political reality on global warming legislation is to be the bicoastal tendencies to regulate CO2 as opposed to Midwest politicians' lesser willingness to regulate it. The story was syndicated with alternative headlines, such as "Some Democrats Seek Slowdown on Energy Policy: Global Warming - Middle state lawmakers fear further damage to their economies" (and sometimes as a shorter or altered article).

A false dichotomy is presented to narrow our choices and exclude any thought of system-change or culture change: "This brown state/green state clash is likely to encumber any effort to set a mandatory ceiling on the carbon dioxide emissions blamed as the biggest contributor to global warming -- something [Mr.] Obama has declared to be one of his highest priorities." Revealing the priorities of the New York Times, the story referred to "crucial electoral battlegrounds... that stand to lose the most from such regulation." Lose? Good grief, must loss be more of an economic than ecological concept? Without life there's no economy, hello!

While it's significant that California gets "only 20.7 percent of its electricity from coal and 40 percent from hydroelectric power and renewable sources... while Ohio drew 86 percent of its electricity from coal..." -- the national economy and its petroleum infrastructure are totally unsustainable from a peak-oil standpoint, and regulating a slowing of emissions is no solution for our climate crisis. For, "Even if global carbon-dioxide levels reverted to preindustrial levels, it still would take 1,000 years or longer for the climate changes already triggered to be reversed, scientists said Monday." (the CO2 story)

News headlines differ from media outlet to media outlet, even when the text of the story is identical -- or truncated from the bottom as in the case of The Portland Oregonian ("Study: CO2 Effects All But Irreversible"). This national story emanated from the National Academy of Sciences. The main syndicated report was by the Los Angeles Times' Thomas Maugh II, with the "Washington Post" included as part of a long-standing news-sharing deal.

National Public Radio covered it and offered text on their website: "Environment: Global Warming Is Irreversible, Study Says"

The LA Times-Washington Post version on latimes.com, "Climate change has a firm grip", was buried in that website's Environment section, and was secondary to an L.A. clean-truck report.

The CO2 story was carried differently as "Study says some global warming now irreversible" in the San Francisco Chronicle -- it was in the "News" section rather than "Environment". The latter treatment is as if we can ignore a "section" of "life" like Sports or the Environment.

Maybe we like to feign surprise so we can keep up our habits to fry the planet; a year ago the same news was given by the IPCC:
"No Stopping Climate Shift, U.N. Study Says" (also by Thomas H. Maugh II, Feb. 2, 2007)

In the spirit of first things first,

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 — President Obama is moving quickly to act on the environmental promises that were a centerpiece of his campaign. But tackling global warming will be far more difficult — and more costly — than the new emissions standards for automobiles he ordered with the stroke of a pen on Monday.

Already, the Congressional Democrats Mr. Obama will need to carry out his mandate are feuding with one another.

By coincidence or design, most of the policy makers on Capitol Hill and in the administration charged with shaping legislation to address global warming come from California or the East Coast, regions that lead the country in environmental regulation and the push for renewable energy sources.

That is a problem, says a group of Democratic lawmakers from the Midwest and Plains States, which are heavily dependent on coal and manufacturing. The lawmakers have banded together to fight legislation they think might further damage their economies.

“There’s a bias in our Congress and government against manufacturing, or at least indifference to us, especially on the coasts,” said Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio. “It’s up to those of us in the Midwest to show how important manufacturing is. If we pass a climate bill the wrong way, it will hurt American jobs and the American economy, as more and more production jobs go to places like China, where it’s cheaper.”

This brown state-green state clash is likely to encumber any effort to set a mandatory ceiling on the carbon dioxide emissions blamed as the biggest contributor to global warming, something Mr. Obama has declared to be one of his highest priorities. Mr. Obama has said he intends to press ahead on such an initiative, despite opposition within his own party in Congress and divisions among some of his advisers over the timing, scope and cost of legislation to curb carbon emissions.

The centrist Democrats who urge a slower-paced approach represent states that are crucial electoral battlegrounds and that stand to lose the most from such regulation. They say they believe that global warming is a serious threat and they will support legislation to address the problem — but not at the expense of their already-strained workers and industries.

These Democrats are concerned, they say, that climate bills will be written by committees in the House and Senate led by two liberal California Democrats, Senator Barbara Boxer and Representative Henry A. Waxman, and shaped by Mr. Obama’s team of environmental and energy advisers, virtually all of whom are from California or the East Coast.

For decades, California has led the nation in environmental regulation, including the most sweeping effort to address global warming by imposing mandatory caps on greenhouse gas emissions starting in 2012.

Following California’s lead, a group of Northeastern States have created a partnership known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative to control carbon emissions.

But California and many East Coast States also differ sharply in the extent to which they depend on coal — a fossil fuel that is a major culprit in producing carbon emissions. California, for example, derived only 20.7 percent of its electricity from coal and 40 percent from hydroelectric power and renewable sources in 2005, while Ohio drew 86 percent of its electricity from coal that year, according to the Department of Energy. Other states of the Great Lakes and Plains are much more like Ohio than California in energy usage.

In the space of a single afternoon this month, Ms. Boxer, Mr. Waxman and the House speaker Nancy Pelosi, another California Democrat, issued statements declaring their intent to work with Mr. Obama to act quickly on comprehensive climate and energy legislation, with a goal of passage this year. Mr. Waxman said he expected to move a climate bill out of his Energy and Commerce Committee by Memorial Day. Ms. Boxer said “the writing is on the wall that legislation to combat global warming is coming soon.”

Rahm Emanuel, the new White House chief of staff, endorsed the lawmakers’ timetable and said he believed the goal of passage of a broad climate change bill this year was “realistic,” given the substantial Democratic majorities in the House and Senate.

Mr. Obama and leaders in Congress have endorsed a so-called cap-and-trade system in which power plant owners and other polluters could meet limits on heat-trapping gases like carbon dioxide by either reducing emissions on their own or buying credits from more efficient producers.

Mr. Obama’s energy and environmental advisers include Lisa P. Jackson, the former head of the New Jersey environmental agency who will head the Environmental Protection Agency; Steven Chu, former director of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, who is the new secretary of energy; and Nancy Sutley, former deputy mayor of Los Angeles for environmental affairs, the new chairwoman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

Carol M. Browner, who will occupy the new post of White House coordinator for climate and energy policy, is a former head of the E.P.A., a former director of Florida’s environmental agency and was a senior adviser to former Vice President Al Gore.

The appointees come to office with a mandate from the president to transform the nation’s energy economy and to lead the world in addressing climate change.

But their ambitions confront a brutal reality of a weak economy, fading public concern about climate change and serious qualms within their own party about the costs of taking on global warming and who will pay them.

They will also have to deal with bruised feelings among many Democrats over the coup Mr. Waxman mounted last November to wrest the gavel of the Energy and Commerce Committee from its longtime leader, Representative John D. Dingell, Democrat of Michigan and a longtime champion of the auto industry and other Midwest manufacturers.

“For us, it’s still a big disappointment,” said Senator Debbie Stabenow, Democrat of Michigan, referring to the unseating of Mr. Dingell, who was pursuing a more moderate climate proposal than those advocated by Ms. Boxer and Mr. Waxman.

“My message over all is that for us to support what needs to be done in addressing global warming we need to demonstrate that, in fact, jobs are created,” Ms. Stabenow said. “It’s not a theoretical argument. We have to come up with a policy that makes sense, that is manageable on the cost end, that creates new technology — and that treats states equitably and addresses regional differences.”

Ms. Stabenow is a leader of the so-called Gang of 10, representing the coal-dependent states in the middle of the country; the group was formed after the failure of a Senate global warming bill pushed by Ms. Boxer last June. The members’ goal is to assure that their concerns are met in any future legislation.

The other original members are Senators Brown of Ohio, John D. Rockefeller IV of West Virginia, Carl Levin of Michigan, Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, Mark Pryor of Arkansas, Jim Webb of Virginia, Evan Bayh of Indiana, Claire McCaskill of Missouri, and Ben Nelson of Nebraska.

In the fall, six more Democratic senators joined the group: Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, Kent Conrad and Byron L. Dorgan of North Dakota, Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, Tim Johnson of South Dakota and Ken Salazar of Colorado.

Mr. Salazar has since left the Senate to become secretary of the interior.

“We will play an important role in the final bill,” Ms. Stabenow said.

Representative Edward J. Markey, the Massachusetts Democrat who has been a leader in Congress on environmental matters for three decades, has been assigned by Mr. Waxman to write the House’s version of global warming legislation. Mr. Markey said he was very aware of the concerns of coal-state Democrats.

He noted that Mr. Obama, who comes from Illinois, a coal-dependent state, had traveled to Ohio last week to speak at a factory that produces parts for wind turbines.

“Every single wind turbine takes 26 tons of steel to construct,” Mr. Markey said. “A lot of new jobs will be created if we craft a piece of global warming legislation correctly, and that is our intention.”

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Climate change has a firm grip

Researchers say that even if nations can get carbon dioxide levels under control, it would take 1,000 years or longer for the climate changes already triggered to be reversed.

By Thomas H. Maugh II

January 27, 2009

Even if by some miracle the nations of the world could bring carbon dioxide levels back to those of the pre-industrial era, it would still take 1,000 years or longer for the climate changes already triggered to be reversed, scientists said Monday.

The gas already here and the heat that has been absorbed by the ocean will exert their effects for centuries, according to an analysis published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Over the long haul, the warming will melt the polar icecaps more than had previously been estimated, raising ocean levels substantially, the report said.

And changes in rainfall patterns will bring droughts to the American Southwest, southern Europe, northern Africa and western Australia comparable to those that caused the 1930s Dust Bowl in the U.S.

"People have imagined that if we stopped emitting carbon dioxide, the climate would go back to normal in 100 years, 200 years," lead author Susan Solomon, a senior scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said in a telephone news conference. "That's not true."

The changes will persist until at least the year 3000, said Solomon, who conducted the study with colleagues in Switzerland and France.

Scientists familiar with the report said it emphasized the need for immediate action to control emissions.

"As a climate scientist, this was my intuition," said geoscientist Jonathan T. Overpeck of the University of Arizona. "But they have done a really good job of working through the details and . . . make a case that the situation is more dire than we thought if we don't act quickly and aggressively to curb carbon dioxide emissions."

Kevin Trenberth, head of climate analysis at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., said the persistence of climate change caused by global warming was "poorly appreciated by policymakers and the general public, and it is real."

"The policy relevance is clear: We need to act sooner, even if there is some doubt about exactly what will happen, because by the time the public and policymakers really realize the changes are here, it is far too late to do anything about it," Trenberth said.

The report came as President Obama ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to consider allowing states the right to enact auto emission standards stricter than federal rules.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton also is expected to appoint a new envoy for climate change to bolster the administration's credentials in environmental policy.

The slowness with which ocean water circulates is central to the new findings. Carbon dioxide is primarily removed from the atmosphere through absorption into seawater, an incredibly slow process because of the time it takes for surface water saturated with the gas to be replaced by deeper water that can further absorb carbon dioxide.

That gas accounts for about half of the global warming caused by greenhouse gases, but the other gases are removed from the atmosphere more quickly. Thus, the long-term influence of carbon dioxide will have the greatest effect on climate change, the report said.

Moreover, heat absorbed by the ocean is released slowly, and will continue to contribute to global warming even if the concentration of greenhouse gases should decline, the authors said.

Solomon said in a statement that absorption of carbon dioxide and release of heat -- one acting to cool the Earth and the other to warm it -- would "work against each other to keep temperatures almost constant for more than 1,000 years."

Geoscientist Jorge L. Sarmiento of Princeton University said, "This is really a wake-up call about the seriousness of this issue."

The study looked particularly at ocean levels and rainfall. The team found that by thermal expansion of ocean water alone, sea levels will rise from 1.3 to 3.2 feet if carbon dioxide climbs from the current level of 385 parts per million to 600 parts per million, and twice that if it peaks at 1,000 parts per million.

Melting of the icecaps could increase sea levels even more, inundating low-lying islands and continental shorelines, but the effects are too uncertain to quantify, Solomon said.

Reductions in rainfall would also last centuries, the report said, decreasing drinking water supplies, increasing fire frequency and devastating dry-season farming of wheat and maize.

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His article is at latimes.com

"No Stopping Climate Shift, U.N. Study Says", by Thomas H. Maugh II, Feb. 2, 2007:

articles.latimes.com

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First story: "Geography Is Dividing Democrats Over Energy" by New York Times' John Broder:

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