

## McCain due global warming credit

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It took a Republican president, Richard Nixon, to go to China. Perhaps Republican presidential candidate John McCain's proclamation in Portland that global warming is real and urgent will similarly overcome the right-left divide and make it acceptable for everyone to embrace the need to solve the climate crisis.

To be sure, McCain's announcement likely had as much to do with his desire to lure independents and moderate Oregon Democrats as it did with global warming. But I'm convinced this is more than just a campaign ploy. With Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., McCain introduced the first global warming legislation back in 2003. He knows this is an extremely serious problem.

If the Republican nominee for president can acknowledge openly that the Earth is warming and that humans are the dominant cause, then perhaps it's time for conservatives, moderates and liberals alike throughout Oregon and Lane County to consider doing the same. Global warming is no more a partisan issue than is cancer. Everyone is potentially affected, and everyone will benefit from solutions.

McCain proposed a cap-and-trade solution. That opens the door for an informed discussion about the best way to reduce emissions. The first question should be about goals.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said greenhouse gas emissions must be stabilized by 2015, and then reduced by 80 percent (below 1990 levels) by 2050. Many analysts say the United States must go even further by becoming essentially carbon free.

McCain's proposal calls for only a 60 percent cut in emissions. In one sense, this discrepancy won't matter much. It will take years to reduce emissions by even 40 percent, so there will be ample time to nail down the exact reductions needed.

But it's one thing to establish the expectation that just more than half of our emissions must be cut, and quite another to clarify that we must become carbon free.

With the goal in mind, two policy approaches are available to reduce emissions: regulations and incentives.

Regulations put government in the role of mandating how much carbon dioxide individual entities can emit, and sometimes even what technologies they should use. McCain ignores this approach. He criticized those he said are pursuing "crippling"

regulation.

I doubt that many people feel that regulations such as building codes and standards for appliances and vehicle mileage are crippling. It seems like a glaring omission.

Incentive-based approaches, which include a tax on carbon emissions and a cap on the total annual level of emissions combined with a system of tradable emission allowances — called cap-and-trade — give polluters an enticement to curb carbon dioxide.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office issued a report in February that analyzed these incentive approaches. It concluded that a carbon tax offered a number of advantages over any form of cap-and-trade.

A tax, for example, would reduce emissions at lower costs than cap-and-trade because it would provide business and individuals with greater flexibility in where and how emissions can be achieved.

In addition, a large government apparatus would be needed to oversee cap-and-trade. Carbon taxes can be implemented through existing programs, such as the federal gas tax and excise taxes on coal.

A tax-based approach would impinge on everyone equally. Cap-and-trade programs run the risk of allowing the rich and big companies to keep polluting and simply purchase carbon offsets from others.

The major downside of a carbon tax is that it lacks the hard limit on emission that a cap-and-trade program provides, so the total amount of CO<sub>2</sub> reduced in any particular year would be uncertain.

McCain's cap-and-trade proposal ignores the CBOs recommendations. But he is not alone. Democrats Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton have also proposed cap-and-trade programs. Few politicians seem willing to mention a carbon tax today, even though cap-and-trade will raise costs for anything powered by gas, oil and coal just as surely as a tax will.

Ultimately, a combination of regulations and incentives will be needed. The policy framework recently released by the Western Climate Initiative, in which Oregon is involved, has taken this approach. It includes cap-and-trade and support for regulations.

Many on the left proclaim that the Democratic candidates' proposals are superior to McCain's. In reality, all three represent decent starts with different weaknesses and omissions.

More critically, how McCain's proposal stacks up against the others may turn out to be less important than the permission he provided for people of all persuasions to search for ways to solve global warming. For this, he should be given tremendous credit.

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