

Obama's climate speech was only a good start

President Obama's speech two weeks ago announcing his plan to address climate disruption was historic. Not because it will significantly reduce the problem. It won't. It was a landmark because for the first time a U.S. president made the issue a national priority.

Little in the president's plan is all that remarkable. The courts, for example, have already decided that the Environmental Protection Agency has the authority to regulate emissions from new and existing power plants. The president merely directed the EPA to complete the standards.

In addition, setting energy efficiency targets, funding efficiency improvements, and many of the other actions in the plan are important, but not earth-shattering.

What is significant is that the president unequivocally stated that our nation has a moral obligation to reduce emissions. With just 5 percent of the world's population, the United States has generated almost 30 percent of the total historic emissions that are disrupting the climate. Although China is now the largest annual emitter, our per capita emissions are still far greater. Our disproportional contribution underscores the United States' moral responsibility to lead the way.

Equally important, the president acknowledged that the climate is being affected now and said everyone must act to reduce the problem. His plan touches on almost every sector of the economy. He urged Americans to get educated, apprise their colleagues and friends, push back against deniers, and tell elected officials to support action or be voted out. That is extraordinary.

Yet no one should think the president's plan will prevent catastrophic climate disruption. It is merely a starting point.

The White House, for example, said its goal is to reduce emissions by the 17 percent the president announced at the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit. However, administration officials don't actually know how much emissions will be reduced by their plan.

Further, top climate scientists now say that due to recent increases in global emissions, the United States and other industrialized nations must slash emissions far more than 17 percent by 2020 to keep temperatures from rising to levels that trigger catastrophic effects.

Despite his enthusiastic call to "divest" from fossil fuels, the president's plan also includes an "all of the above" energy policy that promotes the continued use of fossil fuels, including natural gas. But a 2011 report by the International Energy Agency found that a large global shift to natural gas would generate enough greenhouse gas emissions to raise global average temperatures by 6 degrees Fahrenheit, well beyond the level that triggers catastrophic effects.

Concerns about job losses undoubtedly played a central role in the president's ongoing promotion of fossil fuels. This is based on a fundamental misjudgment. The failure to dramatically cut emissions by phasing out fossil fuels is destroying as many jobs as it is protecting. It is also undermining the expansion of industries our children will depend on for future jobs.

Weather events made more extreme by climate disruption are directly affecting jobs. Superstorm Sandy caused tens of thousands of job losses. The historic drought in portions of the West and Midwest has forced many farms and food processing firms into bankruptcy.

Recent studies found that rising heat and humidity caused by greenhouse gasses reduce workers' productivity in southeastern states by about 10 percent during summer months. This is the equivalent of losing about 1.25 million jobs annually.

The millions in subsidies that support our addiction to fossil fuels delay the expansion of clean energy technologies. Google, for instance, concluded that a mere five-year delay in the adoption of clean energy technologies could cost the economy an aggregate \$2.3 trillion to \$3.2 trillion in unrealized gains by midcentury.

The real choice the president faces is jobs vs. jobs, not jobs vs. the climate.

Finally, the president failed to call on Americans to shift practices in any significant way. In response to an energy crisis in 1973, Oregon Gov. Tom McCall ordered state agencies to eliminate unnecessary energy use, called on Oregonians to voluntarily reduce energy consumption and banned "wasteful" outdoor commercial lighting.

Had the president done something similar, the symbolic importance for our nation and the world would have been huge. The United States would also quickly cut emissions with almost no meaningful change in lifestyle.

The president deserves great credit for making climate disruption a national priority. But the contradictions and omissions must be resolved for the plan to become more than a starting point.

Avoiding catastrophic climate disruption is still up to us. Every household, business, utility, civic group, faith organization and public agency in Lane County and nationwide must aggressively slash their emissions and prepare for the effects of climate disruption if climate disruption is to be reduced to manageable levels.

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