

**BOB DOPPELT**

# Democrats' response to climate change tepid

---

**BY BOB DOPPELT**

*For The Register-Guard*

SEPT. 29, 2016

---

Few elected Democrats openly deny that the Earth is warming because of human activities. Does that matter? Are Democrats doing what's necessary to prevent uncontrollable climate disruption?

The answer is no. Although President Obama has taken some positive steps, efforts by most Democrats at all levels to address the climate crisis have been at best tepid, and sometimes not much different than if they denied the science of climate disruption.

You might wonder how this could be, given that the U.S. Energy Information Administration says that our energy-related carbon emissions have dropped 12 percent since 2005. About 68 percent of the decline is because of the use of natural gas produced by hydraulic fracturing — fracking — from shale rock, which the Obama administration has promoted under its “all of the above” energy policy.

But the EIA's figures do not include methane emissions released by fracking. Methane is 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas over a 20-year period. Studies have found that, because of flawed measurements, methane emissions from fracking are 50 percent to 90 percent higher than federal agencies report. U.S. methane emissions have increased 30 percent since 2007, and we are responsible for 30 percent to 60 percent of the big global increase in this dangerous gas since that year.

The EIA's numbers also do not include the carbon emissions generated from the large, though declining, amount of coal mined in the U.S. that is exported and burned in other nations.

When these emissions are included, the reported drop in U.S. energy-related greenhouse gases becomes highly questionable. The Obama administration's confused thinking causes it to promote activities that generate significant emissions. The Oregon Democratic congressional delegation often exhibits similar types of climate blindness by, for example, supporting higher logging levels on Bureau of Land Management lands. These are among the most carbon-dense forests in the world.

An analysis by my colleague Ernie Niemi, an economist with Natural Resource Economics Inc., found that if these forests are cut, damage to the climate and society will amount to at least \$370,000 per acre. This type of information never seems to be included in deliberations about higher logging levels.

Similar blindness occurs at the state level. The Democrat-controlled Oregon Legislature recently raised the state lodging tax, primarily to help fund the 2021 World Outdoor Track

& Field Championships in Eugene. Those throngs will generate thousands of tons of emissions from travel and other sources.

Democrats could have required that a portion of the revenue generated by the new tax be invested in solar, wind and other clean renewable energy projects to counteract the emissions generated by the track event. But this was never proposed.

We will continue to use energy and wood to travel and hold sporting events. But with civilization-changing global warming now a real possibility, new policies must always reduce the climate impacts of these activities. Many Democrats remain blind to this responsibility, however, in part because business-as-usual is less threatening.

The fossil fuel industry, for example, claims our economy will collapse without fossil fuels and that natural gas is cleaner than coal. Many Democrats buy this line.

Economist Robert Pollin, however, projects that because at least 5.4 percent of the natural gas that is produced leaks into the atmosphere, even shifting 50 percent of coal use to gas would at best cut U.S. emissions by just 8 percent. When other environmental impacts are included, Pollin concludes that natural gas is as bad as burning coal.

Pollin and others also have documented how eliminating fossil fuels will actually increase jobs and enhance our economy. Fracking merely delays the necessary shift to economically advantageous renewable energy.

Democrats also remain blind by pigeonholing climate disruption as an “environmental” issue, rather than seeing that it encompasses most economic and social activities. State Rep. Nancy Nathanson, D-Eugene, for instance, a chief sponsor of the lodging tax bill, said essentially that she supports action on climate disruption but was not the right person to talk with because she focuses on budgetary issues, not the environment.

The failure to grasp the connection between higher taxes to increase tourism and higher carbon emissions is one of many examples of how blind many Democrats are to the causes and solutions to the climate crisis. Democrats need to remove their blinders and ensure that every policy they enact today reduces the chances of runaway climate disruption.

*Bob Doppelt of Eugene, executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on issues related to sustainability and climate change. His latest book is “Transformational Resilience: How Building Human Resilience for Climate Disruption Can Safeguard Society and Increase Wellbeing.”*