

Cap-and-trade is not the solution

Bob Doppelt For The Register-Guard

The governors of six Western states – including Oregon – and two Canadian provinces have formed the Western Climate Initiative with the goal of launching a cap-and-trade program. But a similar program in Europe has resulted in greenhouse gas emissions increasing, not dropping.

So it would seem cap-and-trade programs face rough sledding.

This should not be a surprise.

Global warming, at its core, is not actually a technology problem, a policy problem or even an energy problem. It is the greatest failure of thought in human history. Attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will fail unless people first alter their thinking and behavior.

The Earth is warming because humans, primarily in the United States and other Western nations, suffer from systems blindness.

We have failed to recognize the effects on our ecological and social systems, on which all life on Earth depends, that stem from our insatiable use of fossil fuels, our massive resource consumption and our huge emissions of greenhouse gases.

Systems blindness permeates countless facets of society today.

Much of the trouble with the European Union's cap-and-trade program can be traced to the fact that many of the regulated industries see it simply as another government program to be manipulated for their financial benefit.

Rather than actually reducing emissions, others are simply paying for carbon-offset projects that supposedly reduce emissions, but often cannot be verified or may have occurred anyway without those funds. The trend indicates that many companies intend to continue with business as usual.

And some industries are putting intense pressure on the European Union to prevent meaningful change to the program, potentially undermining the entire effort.

Similarly, even before it is launched, some of the industries that would be regulated under the Western Climate Initiative's cap-and-trade program have opposed it aggressively.

These companies suffer from systems blindness. They cannot grasp how their production and use of fossil fuels adds more heat-trapping CO₂ to the thermal blanket that surrounds the Earth, thus threatening the human and ecological systems in which they and their customers are enmeshed.

Consumers also are afflicted by systems blindness. An extensive effort is under way in Oregon and other states to reduce locally generated emissions. Much of the success, however, may be an illusion. That's because consumers today buy thousands of products that have significant "embodied emissions" – greenhouse gases generated outside of the United States to produce goods that are used here. Those emissions don't count against domestic totals.

In 2006, the United States imported \$84 billion worth of computers and related equipment, which generated an estimated 66 million metric tons of carbon dioxide outside the United States, according to a study published last year in VentureBeat. If imports of semiconductors, electronic components and audiovisual equipment are included, the total comes to \$261 billion of imports and 151 million metric tons of carbon dioxide. This is 3.5 times larger than the emissions from all electric power generation in California.

Total U.S. imported embodied emissions grew by almost half between 1997 and 2004 alone, according to a study by Carnegie Mellon University. The federal Environmental Protection Agency says U.S. emission inventories could increase by up to 30 percent if imports are included.

In short, we have exported a big chunk of our emissions overseas. But, most consumers remain blind to the effects of their consumption choices.

Many people believe that what they consume does not matter as long as they recycle. This is yet another form of systems blindness.

Recycling usually is a good thing. A large number of our household and commercial products, however – from personal care and cleaning products to aerosols, garden chemicals, furniture, packaging, and plastic bags and bottles – are made with petroleum and its derivatives, which have high-embodied emissions. Recycling markets do not exist for many of these items. Even when they are recycled and used in other products, markets are created for climate damaging materials, and a self-reinforcing system is created.

It is possible to overcome systems blindness? Yes. The starting point is to consider your carbon footprint every time you purchase or use goods and services. Buy less stuff. Ask for a full life-cycle emissions inventory every time you make a purchasing decision. Buy products with low emissions and low energy demands. Support public policies that reduce the production and use of fossil fuels.

If we are going to stabilize the climate, we must remove the blinders that prevent us from seeing the real consequences of our current thought patterns. We must begin to think sustainably.

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