

Change culture, not laws

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For The Register-Guard

Published: Oct 20, 2008 09:26AM
Opinion: Editorials & Letters: Story

The race to set a price on carbon dioxide has begun.

The governors of seven Western states, including Oregon, and four Canadian provinces recently unveiled their framework for a regional cap-and-trade program. Beginning in 2012, the Western Climate Initiative proposes to set limits on greenhouse gas emissions that decrease over time, along with a system that would allow utilities and other businesses to trade pollution rights or offset emissions.

The idea behind the initiative is that reductions should be done at the lowest possible cost. Setting a price on emissions is thought to be one of the best ways to achieve that. Price setting can be done through a direct tax on the use of fossil fuels, or by capping the overall level of emissions. Most politicians see tax increases as dead on arrival. So the initiative aims to cap emissions and establish a trading system.

Initial reactions to the initiative proposal were muted. After all, it is merely a framework. The real action will take place in the legislatures of each state, which must authorize the plan. But the trend seems clear.

Although they publicly voice support for emissions reduction, many industries that would be regulated by the initiative are preparing to oppose it strongly. Most fail to grasp — or perhaps are fearful — that fundamental changes in their entire business model will be needed if they are to remain competitive while phasing out emissions.

Support from the environmental community is also uncertain. Many are concerned that the initiative proposes to give away 90 percent of the pollution allocations for free to regulated companies. In

addition, the initiative allows companies to count tree plantings and other suspect “offsets” for up to half of cuts.

Even legislative support is uncertain. With tight budgets and limited staff, some legislators I spoke with voiced concern about their governments’ capacity to effectively administer a complex program that seeks to regulate hundreds of polluters in multiple states across two nations.

If the initiative gains political traction, I’ll be the first to support it. But it faces rough sledding.

The uncertain future of the initiative once again raises an important question: Where should the focus of climate protection efforts be? Should the chief emphasis be on expanded policy options, or should equal or even greater weight be given to change? It’s the difference between a bottom-up shift in thinking and beliefs and top-down regulatory changes — that is, political strategy. The two do not necessarily conflict, but they lead to very different strategies and most likely to different policies in the long run.

A number of authors recently analyzed the longtime approach of the environmental community. “Break Through” by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger and “The Bridge at the End of the World” by James Speth, dean of the Yale School of Forestry, for example, both concluded that the environmental community almost always has shunned cultural change in favor of political strategy. As a result, although it has grown in size and sophistication and achieved its share of successes, the climate and natural environment continued to deteriorate.

New research shows that despite the economic downturn, the United States generated 1.75 billion tons of carbon emissions in 2007, an increase of 2 percent over 2006. This trend is the type that led the authors to conclude that the policy approach of the environmental community, on the whole, must be considered a failure. If we are to solve the climate crisis, cultural change is needed.

The policies people support are a reflection of their thinking. Their thinking, in turn, is determined by their beliefs and assumptions. Cultural change therefore focuses on a change in thinking.

New thinking about the risks of global climate change and the benefits of solutions will produce much more than voluntary emission reduction efforts. It is the key to generating the widespread political support needed to enact strong climate protection policies.

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