

## Heat Opinions

# CLIMATE CHANGE

inconvenient truths, inadequate policy devices, incredible denials, irrelevant messenger

(posted: 12 April 2007; last revised: 12 April 2007)

**INCONVENIENT TRUTHS.** Let's summarize the facts. Global climate changes - especially evident in the past decade - include overall permanent warming - in particular massive melting of glaciers and of sea ice - along with more frequent and intense extremes in weather: both heat and cold waves, droughts, and massive destructive storms (e.g. Katrina). Available evidence convinces scientists that the recent changes are significant, largely permanent or part of worsening trends, and - considering at least the past half million years - unprecedented.

The changes owe to big increases in recent centuries, especially in recent decades, in the lower atmosphere's stocks of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases. The far-and-away most likely causes of this increase are human actions, some recently massive: especially burning of mineral fuels (coal, oil, gas) in industry and transport, and also deforestation and cattle raising.

Per capita, my home town of Long Beach may well rate as a leader in fostering climate change. Leading and politically favored enterprises include the Port of Long Beach, the Boeing Company, Long Beach Municipal Airport - and a cute remade-for-tourism Potemkin waterfront (the 'Rainbow Harbor' complex), complete with Queen Mary and Aquarium of the Pacific. All these enterprises promote and depend on massive long-distance transport of goods or persons.

Although they have been clearly identified as prime causes of climate change, all the above-noted human actions continue largely unabated, even accelerated. Hence foreseen impacts are grim - even just from projected sea-level rise owing to melt or float-off of ice.

In regards these impacts too, again Long Beach may rate as a leader - at least among USA west coast cities. Here, just Greenland ice (never mind Antarctic ice too) will drown low-lying neighborhoods which house tens of thousands of people, and billions of dollars of real estate and of annual industrial activity. These include: Port of Long Beach, Rainbow Harbor, Belmont Shore, Peninsula, Naples, Marina Pacifica, Los Cerritos Wetlands, and elsewhere by the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers.

**INADEQUATE POLICY DEVICES.** Until humanity has stopped the great part of the present massive burning and other causative actions, climate change will get ever worse and its eventual and permanent impacts more painful and cataclysmic. Too much policy talk has disregarded this basic bottom line.

Instead, much talk has centered, misleadingly, on three tactical devices for possible use in helping to make pollution control seem more palatable or business-as-usual. These are called 'carbon taxes', 'carbon credits' and 'carbon offsets'. Here, 'carbon' refers to 'carbon pollution', i.e. production or release of carbon-based 'greenhouse' atmospheric gases (notably CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>) that promote global warming.

A given monetary amount of 'carbon tax' would be levied - by suitable authorities - on each unit of carbon pollution. A 'carbon credit' would be a license - from authorities, to a presumably deserving enterprise - to generate in a given year a given quota amount of carbon pollution. A 'carbon offset' to a given activity is an action - such as planting a tree - which does or will prevent an amount of carbon pollution equal to that generated by the activity. Carbon offsets are especially dubious (as discussed later), but even carbon taxes and credits have been over-hyped.

Further increase in atmospheric greenhouse gases could indeed be stopped by universal and strict enforcement of a high-enough carbon tax or of a low-enough total budget of annual carbon credits. However, the key here is the ENFORCEMENT. The ballyhooed devices - carbon taxes or credits - serve mainly just as tactics, inadequate in themselves, which can have useful and credible impact only with universal and strict enforcement, of the required pollution tax payments or credit limitations. Such enforcement will require detailed global monitoring of pollution and detection of its specific sources, and swift stoppage and sure punishment of detected violations. Getting the tax or credit devices in place is a much less challenging task than getting the needed change in political wills and attitudes for adequate enforcement. In many a nation, political will does not yet exist to enforce even the nation's own existing taxes and resource-use quotas.

Some schemes for carbon credits would allow their trade (sale or other transfer). In theory, tradable credits would promote overall compliance with pollution limits, or anyhow ease its short-term pains. Less-efficient enterprises (those with greater interim needs to pollute) could buy credits from more-efficient enterprises: so ability to sell (or need to buy) credits would reward and promote efficiency. However, even with strict global enforcement, tradable credits could be far more problematic than non-tradable ones. As shown by some present-day fisheries (for fish take, not carbon pollution production), use of tradable credits can work but effective enforcement requires continuous updating and local tracking of info on who at any time has how much remaining credit. With non-tradable credits, these info processes are infrequent and simple, but with tradable credits they are far more challenging. Big problems could arise from toleration of any Enron-type operation that daily creates many trades, at least on paper, thereby rapidly generating temporary credits for many different parties.

Without big changes in political will and practices, carbon credit could be as insidious for world society as ordinary 'plastic' financial credit is for some families: a device which quietly papers over accumulation of debt which eventually becomes crushing. For carbon credit, default would be global and take the form of drowned coasts worldwide: apres nous le deluge!

Right now, 'carbon offsets' are much promoted. However, reliance on offsets is extremely problematic. The total impact of all possible offsets, using methods and technologies that now are no more expensive overall for society than simply (if disruptively) stopping the existing burning and other carbon pollution, would cancel effects of at most a fraction of today's ongoing pollution. Many offsets (e.g. from planting a tree) take time to phase in their good impact. There are problems of definition: how far into the future can an offset's cancelled-out pollution occur? and by what standards can existence (absent the offset) of this pollution be accepted as reliably projected?

Dubiously, most of what are being promoted and directly sold as 'offsets' are not actual actions but certificates: i.e. paper claims that due actions have been or will be performed. One problem is that of reliable verification: that a new and distinct offsetting action has actually been (or surely will be) performed each time a certificate so claims. Another problem is one of attitude. Namely, offsets (or mere certificates) are being promoted somewhat as were papal indulgences a few centuries ago: as goods whose value lies in their canceling, and thereby perhaps even justifying, the certificate-buyer's evil pollution-creating deeds - as if the buyer has no duty anyhow to avoid evil deeds, or to do good deeds without having first done evil ones.

**INCREDIBLE DENIALS.** Climate-change truths are not merely 'inconvenient'. They embody shockingly pessimistic trends and visions. And, from the 17-th century European colonization onward, pessimistic visions have rarely been natural for Americans. The Puritan settlers envisioned a 'new Jerusalem'. The USA itself was born out of the hopeful 18-th century Enlightenment. During the optimistic 19-th century Victorian era the nation expanded exuberantly toward its 'Manifest Destiny'. During the 20-th century it became the world's confident super-power.

So in the USA until lately, climate-change truths were massively downplayed or disparaged. Well funded by fuel vendors (notably Exxon), nay-sayers sought to deny - or muddle perceptions of - the climate changes, of their permanent and overall adverse impacts, and of their causes.

Only in recent months have the deniers been forced to change their tunes - indeed several times. They have gone from bald denials of the very fact of significant changes; to claims that the bad news either isn't really bad (never mind the noted impacts) or that its causes are non-human, whether periodic or random; and then to complaints that scientific knowledge about climate is incomplete - as if on any topic, scientific knowledge is ever truly 'complete', or as if information sufficient for practical conclusions and actions must (or even can) always first be verified as perfect and utterly certain. Now, as the den of deniers drastically dwindles, it becomes clear - very simply if unhappily - that climate change is here, is permanent, is bad and getting worse, and is human-caused - indeed is being aggravated by typical USA life-ways and arrangements.

Some deniers have tried to be or anyhow look reasonable, even sophisticated. For instance, 'The Skeptical Environmentalist' Bjorn Lomborg claimed that actions to combat global warming would be a less profitable social investment than, for instance, actions to combat tropical disease or improve water purity. But Lomborg's approach relied on several dubious elements: ill-defined or unspecified notions of due 'actions'; rapidly changing or readily outdated cost and benefit data; and logical and practical fallacies. In particular, global warming was treated as separate from other problems, but in truth serious anti-warming policies and actions help on inseparable 'other' issues, with manifold economic and social benefits showing up in energy efficiency, prevention and mitigation of diseases, and support for eco-diversity and its reduction of risk to food and other supplies.

Some last-ditch deniers have abandoned even the pretense of reason. Their arguments feature irrelevant ad hominem diversion: finding a scapegoat, and then carrying on as if the scapegoat's faults excuse everyone from worry. Their now-favored scapegoat is an all-too-human self-appointed messenger of the inconvenient truth, the USA's former Vice-Pres. Al Gore. Of course, Gore's (or anyone's) virtues and faults (actual or alleged) are irrelevant both to truths about climate and to careful consideration of various policies to deal with it.

**IRRELEVANT MESSENGER.** It's largely irrelevant for climate policy, but it's interesting for other reasons, including historical comparisons, to examine briefly the various contentions, pro and con, being made about Gore's personal virtues and faults.

Gore admits that his own family's lifestyle results in more than their fair share of carbon pollution. He claims, however, to have covered the extra pollution by buying carbon offsets.

Gore's detractors call him a hypocrite. Are they correct?

Strictly speaking, a hypocrite is one who urges upon other persons what he does not do himself. But Gore appears to be asking only that others do what his family already does: limit their net pollution - if necessary by use of suitable carbon offsets.

However, Gore's detractors could correctly note that his basic tactic - use of carbon offsets - will not in fact suffice in the long term to address climate-change problems. There are nowhere near enough reasonable potential offsets for everyone to use at Gore's per-capita rate.

Gore's defenders might counter that interim voluntary personal behaviors are largely irrelevant, even for judging Gore personally, since what Gore is really after for the longer term - as well as what workable policy will require - is massive legally required universal cutbacks in pollution.

Gore's campaign for action on global warming calls to mind the historic anti-slavery campaign of slave-owner Thomas Jefferson.

Was Jefferson a hypocrite for not immediately freeing his slaves? Yes, if in fact Jefferson's aim was to get many slave-holders voluntarily to free their slaves. However, Jefferson's actual aim seems to have been legal action, not mere voluntary efforts, to better guarantee a prosperous and democratic society. He wanted slavery outlawed, at least by Virginia and other states if not also by the USA, so that freedom of slaves would not depend just on the volition or good grace of slave-holders. In advancing this position Jefferson was no hypocrite at all.

Joe Weinstein

Copyright 2007

Fair use, with prominent attribution, is permitted and encouraged.