

It's Not Too Late—Yet—to Counteract Global Warming

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Article:

After years on the back burner of public policy, global warming is suddenly being taken seriously. The steady drumbeat of news stories about shrinking glaciers, migrating maple trees, and stranded polar bears is finally registering with people. The news media pay less attention to global-warming skeptics than before. The Weather Channel has regular reports and a special website (<http://climate.weather.com>) devoted to news about climate change. And Al Gore won an Oscar for his documentary film on the subject.

The result can be seen in surveys like a recent Time/ABC News poll, which found that only 19 percent of Americans believe that human actions bear no responsibility for global warming.

Each new report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (<http://www.ipcc.ch>) reconfirms the broad consensus among climate scientists that humans are causing global warming. But the scientific consensus hasn't convinced everyone. The hold-outs cling to their claim that the science is still uncertain, with a stubbornness reminiscent of those Japanese soldiers who defended tropical islands long after World War II ended. Prominent among the hold-outs are Republican lawmakers. Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, who bases much of his understanding of climate change on the writings of novelist Michael Crichton, is one of the leaders of this new breed of flat-earthers.

According to one survey, 87 percent of the Republicans in the U.S. Congress believe that nothing's been proven yet regarding global warming. Republican skepticism has actually increased since last year, when the same survey found 77 percent doubting the science. But when even President Bush acknowledges that climate change is happening and is at least partly the result of human actions, you know the tide has turned.

The first column I ever wrote for the News & Record was about global warming. That was 12 years ago, and even then it was hard to ignore the growing evidence that climate change was being spurred by human actions. But I wrote that waiting for absolute proof would be unwise. Instead, the sensible approach is to take precautions. I wrote, "there's no scientific evidence that my house will catch on fire next week, but I think I'll buy homeowner's insurance anyway." I discussed small policy steps that would make sense even if the scientists were wrong about global warming.

Fortunately, people finally seem to understand the fallacy of requiring proof. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents to that Time/ABC News poll believe (inaccurately) that there is "a lot of disagreement" among scientists on global warming. Even so, they see climate change as a serious problem and they believe that government should be doing more to deal with it. This is quite encouraging, and it represents an important step for the American public. As with a personal addiction, no solution is possible until the problem is acknowledged.

But are Americans ready for the solution? After all, there is much wishful thinking on this subject. For example, the Bush administration believes that new technologies are the answer. (Crossing its fingers for new technologies is also the administration's solution to what the president has called our addiction to oil.)

Unfortunately, investing in technology isn't a magic wand, and most experts believe that new technologies are unlikely to make a significant dent in our greenhouse-gas emissions for a few decades.

According to the Time/ABC News poll, the public appears to share the fantasy that technology will be our savior. Of various policy options mentioned in the poll, the most popular, favored by 87 percent of the respondents, was government grants to promote the development of alternative energy sources. Relatively few respondents agreed that taxes should be used to reduce consumption of electricity or gasoline. Apparently, the public believes that taxes won't be needed to finance those grants.

Whether we like it or not, dealing with climate change will involve real trade-offs and real costs. But according to a recent study by the British government, which recommended an array of taxes and emission controls, the costs may be moderate, on the order of 1 percent of global income per year. For the median U.S. household, this would currently imply a reduction in income of a few hundred dollars per year.

In contrast, the study found that by 2050, the economic costs of unimpeded climate change will be between five and 20 percent of the world's income. In spite of the uncertainty inherent in these projections, this is a striking result. The study factored in the likelihood that some people, such as wheat farmers in Manitoba, will benefit from climate change. It also addressed the potentially dire effects on poorer countries.

Not all economists have embraced the British study. Some argue that for rich countries, the costs of trying to stop global warming are as great as the costs of letting it run its course. But at least the debate is moving in the right direction. Instead of pointless arguments about whether we have proof of global warming, we've started arguing about the costs and benefits of particular policies. Should we impose a carbon tax? Will moderate cuts in emissions suffice? How do we balance the welfare of current and future generations?

I concluded my 1995 column by saying that it wasn't too late to "buy insurance" against the future costs of global warming. It's still not too late. But it will be soon.