

The Climate Summit: No One is Talking About: Rationing Fossil Fuels

Fossil Fuel Rationing is The Solution That Will Work

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At Copenhagen, the world is concerned with the question, 'How can we reduce green house gas emissions (GHGs)?'

GHG emissions are directly related to fossil fuel use. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) tells us that 82 % of anthropogenic greenhouse gases are fossil fuel related emissions. [1] This proves one simple truth about climate action: reduce fossil fuel supply and you reduce emissions by almost the same amount.

The EIA data shows the mathematical certainty that if fossil fuel use is reduced by, say, 10%, then anthropogenic GHG emissions will be reduced by 8.2%.

Therefore, it's a nation's fossil fuel supply that determines the bulk of its emissions, and rationing that supply is a certain way to reduce GHGs.

At Kyoto, each signatory country agreed to reduce GHG emissions by a given percentage below 1990 levels. Since Kyoto there has been a lot of hand wringing about how to achieve these goals. The conclusion reached in Canada has been that there is no economic way to achieve its goal. This is not acceptable. Other countries have met their goals.

Countries like Canada that claim they cannot meet their goals are putting the cart before the horse. They want to solve their internal political problems before they address their existing international commitment. Of course, this is unlikely to happen. They need to meet the commitment first, and then tackle their internal problems.

Every nation, including Canada, can ration fossil fuel supply. This is a fairly easy technical problem to solve. There are a relatively small number of fossil fuel entry points into any country: they include only imports and domestic production facilities. For economic reasons, these supply points are already routinely monitored by government agencies. Certainly, any desired level of fossil fuel entering a nation's energy system can be regulated.

With rationing, governments will still find it very difficult to apportion limited energy supply to their industries and consumers. But the problem will be somewhat easier if the government is legally bound to ration its supply by international agreement. All sectors of the society will know that they operate within a finite fossil fuel supply and will learn to accept it. When people understand there is no choice due to a binding agreement, their resistance goes down.

This is why a forum such as Copenhagen should reach an agreement that requires nations to meet their goals through rationing. The international community now knows that some national governments, like ours in Canada, will simply refuse to honour their commitments if they are not legally bound by a rationing requirement. There should also be strong sanctions and penalties built into the agreement, along with oversight accounting mechanisms, in case of non-performance.

On the positive side, there would be no need at all to ration alternative energy sources. Within an environment of finite fossil fuel availability, there would be an enormous competitive advantage to those who pursued the unlimited energy available through alternative technologies. Besides becoming a profitable industry itself, clean energy technology would become an important metric of international competitiveness.

Developed and Developing Nations:

The rationing solution would still leave some persistent international obstacles unresolved. Developed countries would enjoy their in-place infrastructures built through the excessive use of fossil fuels in the past. Developing countries would continue to argue their right to a fair share of development through unrestrained fossil fuel use.

This 'fairness' argument is basically an appeal to transfer the responsibility for developing nations' future emissions to developed nations under a moral argument. But in a global climate crisis, an effective agreement would necessarily disallow any nation's aspirations to achieve economic parity through increased fossil fuel use. These aspirations are in direct conflict with any kind of emission reduction goals, and in the long term they are in no nation's interests.

A more relevant objective would be to honour each nation's obligation to provide for its citizens' basic human needs and comforts through adequate energy use. To this end, criteria should be formulated to equalize world per capita fossil fuel use within the constraints of reducing overall emissions. This could allow developing countries to gradually increase fossil fuel use while requiring developed countries to proportionately reduce their use, both through rationing provisions. Given the great disparity of carbon energy use in the world today, a goal of world per capita fossil fuel equity might not soon be fully realized, but at least an agreed progression toward it would be fair to all.

Notes

1. EIA, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/bookshelf/brochures/greenhouse/Chapter1.htm>

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