



Overseer's Undercurrent Purity Control

December 01, 2006

"We have to go after carbon and reduce it wherever we find it," said House speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi this week.

Her comment - provided to a reporter in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's hearing this week on the case Massachusetts v. EPA, challenging the Bush administration's failure to consider greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles a pollutant under the Clean Air Act - signals a broader theme.

Forget Bush's Axis of Evil; we have a new set of common enemies: carbon dioxide, methane, and hydro fluorocarbons.

California, through the policies of the Schwarzenegger administration and previous efforts by lawmakers and regulatory agencies, has already enlisted in this campaign against carbon. The state has enacted its very own tailpipe emissions standards, which are being adopted by other states, if not by the federal government. We have legislated the nation's strongest commitment to greenhouse gas reductions. We also have a complementary body of regulations in the works to hold power generation emissions to stringent standards equivalent to state-of-the-art natural gas-fired projects.

And to provide non-fossil-fueled alternatives, we've promised billions of dollars in ratepayer and taxpayer money to support energy efficiency, green buildings, and renewable resources.

I can fully endorse these ambitious programs. What I worry about is that we'll end up fighting with each other over the particular methods we choose to pursue the goals because none of them alone will get the job done.

Because we're aiming so high, some will find just about any program or strategy inadequate and a subversion of the promises to do our best to prevent global climate change.

The ink was hardly dry on landmark legislation AB 32 when the governor issued an executive order meant to begin the regulatory process for achieving GHG reductions on several fronts, essentially following through on his stated intentions to use both regulation and market-based mechanisms to cut carbon.

This led to an immediate outcry from some environmental groups and lawmakers, proclaiming the order a betrayal of the intent of the law on at least two fronts. One was that by putting together a joint group of state agencies and departments headed by the secretary of CalEPA to help effect the new regime, Schwarzenegger was going against the Legislature's demand that the California Air Resources Board be the lead agency. The second was that the executive order seemed to elevate a cap-and-trade system for carbon above command and control requirements for mandatory reductions.

Assembly speaker and AB 32 coauthor Fabian Núñez even went so far as to demand that the governor rescind the executive order. Environmentalists, who had been elated by the bill's passage and Schwarzenegger's global leadership just days before, now felt betrayed. "We're very disappointed in the governor's actions," said one.

Thankfully, the governor did not backtrack. The terms of the executive order were no different from what he had been saying he was going to do all along: develop market mechanisms concurrently with regulations, and employ the full strength of state government to get the job

done. There was even an invitation-only conference call for environmental groups that spelled this out prior to the executive order, but I guess some people had a bad connection to reality.

Once, long ago in a social studies class, I learned that most people tolerate racial or ethnic diversity up to the point where it seems that the "minorities" are becoming a significant portion of the community. Then some folks start feeling threatened. If I recall correctly, the professor told us that this tipping point of prejudice was about 15 percent of a neighborhood or city.

Whether this lesson from the racially charged 1960s was or remains true, I don't know, but I think about it in another context. Now that California and 20 other states are requiring that renewable resources make up substantial portions of the energy resource portfolio - in many cases 15 percent or more - I'm sensing a backlash against wind, solar, and hydroelectric energy.

All of the early prejudices against wind turbines are trotted out: they kill birds and bats, they are unsightly and reduce property values, the energy they produce is less valuable because it's intermittent and requires costly capacity backup, and the wind-generated electrons are somehow a threat to grid stability. Similar arguments are raised against expanding other non-baseload, decentralized resources.

These are joined by novel, perhaps fanciful complaints. Someone wrote to my local newspaper this month claiming that wind turbines remove kinetic energy from the wind that propels the turbine blades, sucking moisture out and causing climate change downwind. Another person penned an op-ed charging that hydroelectric dams are not carbon-reducing alternatives at all, but emit twice as much GHG as gas-fired power plants in a "methane fizz" caused by the churning waters and release of gases from organic matter beneath the surface waters.

And Proposition 87, the oil recovery excise tax meant to fund alternative fuels and technologies, went down to defeat largely because of arguments that the people who wrote and promoted the initiative stand to make money from development of ethanol facilities. Those counter-ads, by the way, were funded heavily by the oil companies that stood to lose profits if the measure passed.

I'm not a physicist or a meteorologist, but I can see right through the allegation that wind turbines cause climate change. Turbines cover a tiny fraction of the land mass and run only about 300 feet tall, whereas the moving air sweeps through vast regions at altitudes up to a mile high. There couldn't possibly be much of an effect unless you're measuring constrained volumes of air, say inside a wind tunnel.

On the hydro emissions question, I honestly don't know enough about the science, but even if true, this should not become an argument against most hydroelectric projects. A phenomenon described for a huge World Bank-funded dam that floods jungle watersheds in Brazil is probably not at play in a traditional run-of-the-river dam here in the West. There might certainly be other reasons to remove existing dams, such as river health and salmon habitats, but methane fizz is not among them.

I call this kind of nit-picking "purity control," and I suspect that there's another agenda at work. It's one that favors paralysis of action because nothing practical can ever meet the ideals of perfection.

Don't get me wrong; there are certainly times when proposed actions or plans need to be held up against tough standards. I applaud the same environmental contingent for raising a stink about Southern California municipal utilities' attempt to slip a contract extension for the dirty, near-obsolete Intermountain coal project in under the wire before generation performance standards take effect.

And I'm all for keeping up the pressure to ensure that if a carbon cap-and-trade program is implemented, it is tied to real and meaningful greenhouse gas reductions, and not simply an accounting exercise.

Just don't let the desire for perfection become the enemy of the good.

- Arthur O'Donnell

[Arthur O'Donnell](#)