

On global warming it's mission impossible

‘Solving’ the global climate change problem may be humankind’s mission impossible. That’s the gist of the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations group charged with monitoring global warming.

Unless we make dramatic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, warns the IPCC, we face a future of rapidly rising temperatures that will destroy virtually all the world’s coral reefs, intensify droughts and raise sea levels. We need to take action immediately, if not sooner.

It’s not clear how this would be done. The reality is that global carbon emissions are rising, not falling. Emissions today are about 60 percent higher than in 1990, according to the World Bank.

There are at least three obstacles frustrating the IPCC’s agenda.

First, we don’t have the technologies to reduce and eventually eliminate emissions from fossil fuels. Yes, solar and wind power have made advances, but they still provide only a tiny share of the world’s total energy, about 4 percent. Electric vehicles don’t solve the problem, because natural gas and coal are the underlying energy sources for much of the electricity.

Second, even if we had the technologies to replace fossil fuels, it’s doubtful that we have the political will to do so. Democracies — or, for that matter, dictatorships — have a difficult time inflicting present political pain for future, hypothetical societal gains.

The clearest proof of America’s political bias against the future is the treatment of Social Security and Medicare.

For decades, we have known that an aging population would significantly boost spending for these programs. What did we do to prepare for this inevitability? Not much.

Finally, assuming (unrealistically) that today’s advanced societies overcome these obstacles, it’s unclear whether poorer and so-called “emerging market” countries would follow suit.

Economic and population increases boost energy demand. Consider air conditioners. The world now has 1.6 billion air conditioning units, reports the International Energy Agency. By 2050, that could triple to 5.6 billion units. People in advanced societies won’t abandon air conditioning, and people in poorer countries won’t surrender the chance to enjoy it.

What is to be done?

Maybe nothing. This seems to be Trump's choice, and his hostility is not as crazy as it sounds. If suppressing global warming is as hard as I've argued, one likely response is a series of half measures that don't much affect global warming but do weaken economic growth. The politicians' real aim is to brag that they've "done something" when all they've really done is delude us. Trump would skip this stage.

My own preference is messier and subject to all the above shortcomings. I would gradually impose a stiff fossil-fuel tax (not a 10 or 15 percent tax but a doubling or maybe a tripling of prices) to discourage fossil-fuel use and encourage new energy sources.

Combatting global warming is a noble crusade, but it's much harder than the rhetoric implies. If we were serious about cutting greenhouse gases, we could adopt comprehensive wartime controls that empower the government to mandate changes. Or we could accept a worldwide depression as a way to quash job growth and greenhouse gases. Obviously, neither is in the cards.

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