

60-Second Science Blog - January 14, 2009

Is combating climate change worth the cost?

By David Biello

It's a topic that is likely to come up more and more after President-elect Barack Obama moves into the White House next week. Obama has said that preventing and reversing global warming will be a top priority in his administration—a change from the previous administration's stance that voluntary efforts would be enough—likely through a mandatory cap-and-trade scheme.

Under that type of program, the government sets a cap or overall level for pollution and polluters can trade licenses to pollute to keep within their levels. But opponents of such a scheme note that such a move would ultimately drive up energy costs, because power plant owners will pass along to consumers the costs of staying within the mandatory limits.



So is preventing climate change worth that price, estimated by some to be as much as 1 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP)?

Environmentalists and climate change contrarians (though no one denied the reality of global warming) squared off last night over the issue during a debate sponsored by Intelligence Squared US in New York City—and set to be televised by the BBC in March. Among those arguing it's not worth the cost: Bjorn Lomborg, an economist and founder of the Copenhagen Consensus, an experiment aimed at ranking world problems based on cost-benefit analysis; lawyer, author of "The Bottomless Well" (a book describing the endless supply of energy available) Peter Huber, a senior fellow at the conservative thinktank the Manhattan Institute; and biogeographer / revivalist preacher Philip Stott of the University of London.

Arguing that climate change must be halted: journalist and would-be politician Oliver Tickell; former Sierra Club president and environmental consultant Adam Werbach of public relations firm Saatchi & Saatchi; and consultant and business school professor L. Hunter Lovins of Natural Capitalism Solutions.

On the table for debate: Major reductions in carbon emissions are not worth the money.

The audience, a packed house composed primarily of residents of the Upper West Side of Manhattan but also everyone from an Environmental Protection Agency staffer to a busload of students from Penn State, initially didn't favor the motion, with 49 percent opposed, 35 percent undecided and only 16 percent supporting it.

But then the debate was joined:

Bjorn Lomborg—Cap and trade schemes and other carbon cutting efforts are too expensive for too little good and, besides, there's better ways to spend the money. For example, he said, two billion people mostly in developing countries lack access to adequate sanitation, and a million people, mostly children, die from malaria—both crises that could be addressed with better funding. At present, companies, donors

and the like prefer to be politically correct than effective, he argued. "Do what's rational, not what's fashionable."

Oliver Tickell—Reductions are worth the price to stop global warming, which otherwise will wreak havoc. Otherwise, he warned, the climate will likely transform into one that prevailed on Earth 55 million years ago, long before humans existed. "Even if it's \$1 trillion for adaptation and mitigation," he said, "that's the same as current spending on weapons."

Peter Huber—There's no point in taking steps to reverse global warming unless other major polluters, including China and India, do the same. Coal, the major source of greenhouse gas emissions, cannot possibly be replaced by alternatives because at as little as 3¢ per kilowatt-hour there's nothing as cheap to make energy, something especially important in the developing world. "We can't stop poor people from burning carbon in easy reach ... Five billion poor people are the main problem [for greenhouse gas emissions]," he insisted. "Their fecundity has beaten our gluttony."

Adam Werbach—Fixing climate change is worth it because it will also address some of the world's other problems. He argued that by, for example, upgrading the technology in the electrical grid, U.S. consumers could save \$20 billion. "We can walk and chew gum at the same time," he said, pointing out that it was possible to combat malaria and climate change simultaneously.

Philip Stott—The climate is such a vast, complicated system that we cannot control it and shouldn't even bother trying. He noted that humans thrive successfully in climates ranging from Siberia to the Sahara, and, so, surely can adapt to temp rises of 3.6 to 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit (2 to 3 degrees Celsius). "What climate do they [climate scientists and other proponents of action] want to produce for us?" he asked. Besides, even the European Union, the leading national voice for action on climate change, is largely failing to do anything, with most of its 27 countries woefully short of their commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions under the Kyoto Protocol and at least half are opposing further carbon cuts.

L. Hunter Lovins—It's not actually going to cost that much relative to the benefits that fixing it will deliver. She noted, for instance, that the country could save as much as \$2 billion that it now borrows annually from China to pay Saudi Arabia for its oil. "If you add up all the studies that have been done," by state governments quantifying the savings produced by combating climate change, she said, "that's \$500 billion in savings to the U.S. and 5 million green jobs." Further, the U.S. spends \$480 million in taxpayer dollars annually buying diesel for the North Kabul Power Plant in Afghanistan. Instead the country should encourage the Afghans to grow jatropha for biodiesel, create a biodiesel industry and jobs there and not have to pay for the diesel anymore.

In summing up after a round of questions, Huber pointed a spectral finger at members of the audience in favor of paying for carbon cuts to go out and purchase offsets to cover the emissions of their "sooty souls" as well as the emissions of several people in the developing world (since they can't do it for themselves) for the next 10 years at a cost of roughly \$40,000.

Werbach, on the other hand, quietly noted that the kinds of steps taken to combat climate change—such as improving energy efficiency—also save money and, in the case of corporations, can result in a better product. "Wal-Mart wants quality socks that won't fall down and those probably have less energy in them."

The sentiments of the crowd changed after the debate, with 48 percent still for paying to cut carbon while 42 percent now convinced it wasn't worth the price. (Ten percent said they were still undecided.) After the debate, participants decried the format as no way to get at ideas and Huber had an inkling why his side succeeded: strategic voting. In other words, many of those already convinced that cutting carbon is a boondoggle pretended to be undecided. That's a strategy that may find its ultimate expression in the Congress in the near future.

Credit: © iStockphoto.com/Tom Young