

Climate-change solutions lie beyond self-interest

DONALD A. BROWN is an associate professor of environmental ethics, science and law at Penn State and formerly senior counsel for sustainable development for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

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BY DONALD A. BROWN

Unlike many other states, Pennsylvania has no climate-change strategy. This is a moral and ethical failure. Yet the ethical duties of Pennsylvanians to reduce their carbon footprint are not part of the current political debate.

In his movie "An Inconvenient Truth," Al Gore says three times that climate change is a moral problem, but does not say what kind of moral problem it is or what makes global warming a moral problem. Climate change is a clear moral problem for three reasons:

One, people in one part of the world can hurt people and plants, animals and ecosystems in other parts of the world by emitting more than their fair share of global greenhouse gas emissions. Two, those who are most vulnerable to climate change are some of the poorest people in the world who have had nothing to do with causing the problem. Three, unchecked climate change has potentially catastrophic consequences in the form of increased droughts, floods, sea level rise, deaths from heat waves and vector borne disease, increases in the intensity of storms, and decreases in agricultural capacity.

To its credit, the Rendell administration has been advocating for new energy independence legislation that would fund more renewable energy, create incentives for energy conservation, and do a few other things that will help reduce climate causing emissions in Pennsylvania.

In 2005, Pennsylvania also adopted a law that required 18 percent of electricity supplied at the retail level in 2020 be supplied by nonconventional fossil fuel sources.

Yet, even if the new energy independence legislation is enacted, Pennsylvania will likely fall far short of putting itself on a glide path to reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions to levels that would represent Pennsylvania's fair share of safe global emissions.

Pennsylvania has not set a statewide emission target like 12 other states have done. California, for instance, has committed to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010, 1990 levels by 2020, and an 80 percent reduction by 2050. Because energy demand is going up in all states every year, unless a state adopts an absolute greenhouse gas emissions target, total greenhouse gas emissions can increase even in states that have adopted laws that require some percentage improvements in the kind of energy being supplied.

For instance, even if Pennsylvania were to require that 20 percent of all energy (including energy for transportation, domestic and industrial uses) come from renewable energy sources in 2030, total greenhouse gas emissions could be greater in 2030 than they are now because energy demand is likely to increase by 2 percent per year and there are 22 years until the target would be applicable. Even if demand is less than 2 percent annually, without a statewide enforceable greenhouse gas target, there is no way of assuring that greenhouse gas emissions from Pennsylvania will reach the level of reductions from all sources that are needed by 2050 (at least 80 percent) to make sure Pennsylvania does its fair share in reducing the climate-change menace.

Some justify Pennsylvania's lack of a statewide greenhouse gas target on the political reality that this is a coal-producing state. Yet, New Mexico, which produces significant amounts of coal, has adopted a target of reducing greenhouse gases by 75 percent by 2050.

In support of its energy independence legislation, the Rendell administration has been appealing mostly to the new jobs that will be created by green energy and the independence from foreign oil that such legislation would help enable.

Although the governor occasionally mentions climate change as partial justification for his energy legislation, he has rarely, if ever, talked about the moral obligation of Pennsylvania to reduce its emissions nor made reduction of the threat of climate change a high priority. Yet to achieve the magnitude of emission reductions needed to prevent serious climate change, political leaders need to appeal to motivations other than economic self-interest.

The United States needs leaders who will inspire all citizens to reduce their carbon footprint even if it requires some economic sacrifice, some inconvenience in reducing the number of trips to the store, some car pooling, some use of public transportation, smaller and more efficient cars, turning off all electric devices when they are not needed, or energy taxes that begin to adjust energy costs to take into account the full cost of fossil fuel use.

Narrow appeals to economic self-interest as justification for climate-change policies will fail to mobilize the public response that could be inspired by an appeal to global justice. Appeals to economic self-interest alone will particularly fail to work for those who can afford to pay for higher energy costs that enable unnecessary luxury uses of energy.

Pennsylvanians should reduce their carbon footprint not because they will gain economically (although this may be true), but because they understand that they are obligated to poor people around the world and future generations to do so.

Some Americans will respond to ethical and moral obligations once understood, even if all Americans do not. Where are the Pennsylvanian political leaders who have the courage to talk in these terms?

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