Gambling with our future

By David Folland

For a state without a lottery, horse betting or slot machines, it’s surprising that the majority of our state and federal representatives are gambling with our future. They’re gambling that fossil fuels, especially tar sands, will be the fuel of the future and that the continued use of them will not harm us. We buckle up our children in sturdy car seats. Yet, with our children’s future, it’s as if we’re tossing them in the back of a pickup with no restraints.

The insurance industry is not taking such risks. They realize that human-caused climate change has led to increased frequency and severity of extreme and damaging weather. This has created new odds, and insurers are factoring them into their insurance premiums. To ignore what science has demonstrated would be folly in their business.

And the recently released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report’s “Summary for Policymakers” is not reassuring regarding our risks. This report is very conservative by its structure. Thousands of scientists throughout the world compile and summarize the findings of peer-reviewed literature. The results must be acceptable to the participating countries.

So now the IPCC reports with virtual certainty that the documented warming is human-caused. And they conclude that if greenhouse gas emissions continue unabated, the earth will warm to an additional 4 degrees Centigrade (7.2 degrees Fahrenheit) and oceans will rise an average of 0.75 meters (29.5 inches) by 2100. They also emphasize that “most aspects of climate change will persist for many centuries, even if emissions of CO2 are stopped.”

How can we move quickly to clean energy and avoid the most severe climate effects predicted by the IPCC? A few weeks ago, conservative Republican and former Congressman Bob Inglis came to Utah to seek support for a conservative solution that would drive the transition to clean energy, a solution that is also sought by the nonpartisan Citizens Climate Lobby. Inglis proposed a revenue-neutral tax swap. A tax would be levied on carbon at the source (mine well, or port of entry), and the proceeds would be returned to households or used to reduce other taxes. Such a tax would price the external cost we pay for fossil fuels.

For instance, we now pay for the health costs of carbon pollution-induced heart attacks, strokes and other diseases. The fossil fuel companies are socializing these costs and privatizing profits. These health and other costs of carbon pollution would be priced into the fuel, so we would pay at the meter or the pump.
Imagine a scenario where the science was ignored, yet we still moved our society on to clean energy through a carbon tax. We would stimulate innovation in the free market that would create new jobs, strengthen our national security, while cleaning our air and improving our health.

What if we don’t act on the science that is now so solid? The IPCC has made it abundantly clear that the price of adaptation to unchecked greenhouse gas emission is enormous. In fact, a panel of scientists that introduced the report gave a “carbon budget” for humanity. Burning more than one-sixth of the known fossil fuels would raise the global temperature more than 2 degrees Centigrade (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), a level beyond which catastrophic and irreversible changes would occur.

Public policies have reduced our risk of injury and death from all sorts of hazards, from terrorists on airplanes to fires in buildings. Wouldn’t it be prudent to stop spinning the roulette wheel on our future and reduce the risks that the 5th IPCC has demonstrated so clearly?