A simple solution for reducing CO2 emissions

By George Laur, Jr.

For more than a decade, I’ve read many books, attended seminars, followed the news, and read reports about climate change. Initially I thought, if this is serious, and Congress could do something about it, they would. I’ve become increasingly concerned that climate change is a serious threat to civilization, but the chances that Congress will act are bleak.

I asked a friend from Westboro recently, how many people in northwest Missouri might be interested in learning more about climate change and her answer puzzled me. She said, “So many people up here dislike Obama so much they never talk about climate change.” The response puzzled me because climate change shouldn’t be political. It’s about chemistry and physics.

We’ve known for well over a hundred years about the greenhouse effect of gases like carbon dioxide (CO2). Without greenhouse gases, temperatures on earth would be too cold for life as we know it. It’s like a big blanket around the earth that keeps us warm through the night.

The problem is, we’ve been adding CO2 to the atmosphere at an increasingly rapid pace since the dawn of the industrial revolution. Most of that CO2 will stay in the atmosphere for centuries. We’re getting too warm and can’t throw off the blanket.

Exactly how much and how fast we’ll warm is complicated, but there isn’t any serious debate within the scientific community that if we continue to add CO2 to our atmosphere at the current rates we’ll be in big trouble.

The most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change makes it clear that we must significantly reduce our use of fossil fuels. Many people think it exaggerates the problem, but in reality it’s a very conservative report. It only includes what scientists from all the participating countries, including large oil-producing countries, can agree on. There isn’t a single major scientific society on the planet that disagrees with the assessment.

Some people think global warming has stopped because we just had such a cold winter. But the entire U.S. is less than 2 percent of the world’s surface. While we were cold, the globe had its fourth warmest January since we’ve been keeping records. All the warmer Januaries were this century. January was globally the 38th consecutive January and 347th consecutive month (almost 29 years) with a global temperature above the 20th century average.

The reason climate change so quickly becomes political has to do with the solutions. The conservatives fear it would take massive, big government programs to avoid climate change, and that would be bad for the economy.
The best solution is actually a small government solution that’s good for the economy: put a fee on carbon and refund all the revenue back to households. A tariff on imports from countries without a similar fee would protect American businesses and makes the plan go worldwide. Sure, some of the devil is in the details, but both conservative and progressive economists agree this will reduce CO2 emissions and stimulate the economy.

The wind farms in Atchison County are good examples of how renewables can be good for the economy. But new energy industries have been helped, and then hurt, by complicated and constantly changing production tax credits and renewable energy standards, while the fossil fuel industry has had steady taxpayer support for nearly a century. A carbon fee would be a free-market way to level the playing field for renewables.

Our challenge isn’t that we lack the technology or ingenuity to reduce CO2 emissions. We simply lack the political will to get it done.

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