

Look To Objective Facts with Climate Tax

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Sooner or later, Mother Nature is going to pick sides. Temperatures will rise, fall or remain relatively stable. Ocean levels either will rise precipitously, swamping coastal areas worldwide, or they won't. Changing weather patterns will render vast swaths of currently arable land uninhabitable, or not.

Alarmists like Al Gore and denialists like Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe may not live long enough to know which of their long-range climate forecasts was closer to the mark, but their great-grandchildren will know with some certainty.

A temperature-triggered tax?

Ross McKittrick, an economist at the University of Guelph in nearby southern Ontario, has struck upon a way to leverage Mother Nature's authority in the ongoing debate over how quickly the Earth is heating up and what industrial nations like his (and ours) should do about it.

McKittrick thinks governments should impose a tax on carbon emissions -- hardly a novel idea. But what intrigues scientists and economists on both sides of the global warming debate is McKittrick's proposal to tie such a tax to future temperature changes in the Earth's atmosphere -- specifically the bottom layer, known as the troposphere, which envelops the planet to about 10 miles above its surface. The Ontario economist's notion is that his T3 tax -- short for Tropical Tropospheric Temperature tax -- would initially be set very low.

If McKittrick's own hunches about global warming are correct -- he's a climate change skeptic whose 2002 book "Taken by Storm," written with fellow Ontarian Christopher Essex, argues that forecasts of ecological armageddon are overblown -- tropospheric temperatures will remain low enough that no tax tied to them would significantly penalize any industry for burning a lot of fossil fuels.

If the skeptics are wrong, on the other hand, the tax would rise as precipitously as the atmospheric temperature did. Companies and industries that had failed to embrace alternative energy sources would be hit hard, while those that had cut global warming gas emissions would be rewarded.

Real vs. conjectural numbers

I don't know enough about the science of climate change to be sure whether the temperature trigger McKittrick proposes is the right one. Another environmentalist I respect, "Whole Earth" author Stuart Brand, told the New York Times' John Tierney this week that an annual

measurement of summer Arctic ice might be a better barometer of what is going on with Mother Earth.

But I share Brand's view that real measurements being made in the present would offer many advantages over the "conjectural future ones" being debated by delegates to this week's climate conference in Copenhagen, Denmark.

At the very least, a tax that depended on objective measures of temperature would encourage everyone to spend less money on lobbyists and more money on scientists they trusted to accurately forecast climate trends.

With Mother Nature officially enthroned as the ultimate referee of environmental policy, we'd all be more careful to make sure we were playing by her rules.