

Setting Arbitrary Emission Levels in Concrete

Paul Driessen

I am astonished at how casually activists, bureaucrats and politicians toss out these carbon dioxide reduction targets – as though cutting US (or EU, Canadian, Australian, et cetera) emissions by some essentially random amount by 2020 or 2050 is actually within the realm of possibility. Unless we assume major technological advancements ... and even if we accept the risk of widespread social and economic upheaval ... these targets land somewhere along the spectrum of fanciful, absurd, irresponsible and disastrous.

The group of 130 developing countries wants a 40% reduction from 1990 levels by 2020. A faction of this group wants a 45% cut by 2020. President Obama wants to slash US CO₂ emissions by 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. Earlier congressional proposals talked about 60% cuts by 2050. Greenpeace and other Climate Armageddonites insist that the world must get global CO₂ levels well below 450 ppm (0.045% of the Earth's atmosphere) by 2050 or earlier, despite expanding emissions from China and India – which means “guilty” developed nations must slash their emissions by some 90% by that date.

To illustrate the absurdity of these demands, one need only look at US carbon dioxide emissions data assembled by the Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, for the years 1800 through 2004. The following summary shows how far back in time the United States would have to travel, to achieve these various emission targets.

40% below 1990 levels = CO₂ emission levels last seen in 1957

45% below 1990 = 1951

60% below 1990 = 1929 or 1940 (emissions fell during the intervening years of the Great Depression)

80% below 1990 = 1905

90% below 1990 = 1897

Barring major technological breakthroughs, a massive shift to nuclear power – or blanketing America's wild, scenic, desert, grassland, agricultural and coastal areas with hundreds of thousands of wind turbines and solar arrays – the only way I see to achieve these goals is via enormous reductions in industrial output, air and auto transportation, food production, internet server use, heating and air conditioning, and living standards. (Right now, the United States is 85% dependent on hydrocarbon energy, and twenty states get 60-98% of their electricity from coal. The repercussions of cutting off access to that energy – or pricing it out of reach of poor families, small businesses and manufacturers – would be intolerable and immoral. And let's not forget that every wind and solar “farm” needs CO₂-producing natural gas-fired generators for backup.)

Perhaps millions of Americans would be willing to go part way along this route if Al Gore, James Hansen, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, John and Teresa Kerry, Henry Waxman, Nick Rahall and every warming alarmist environmental group would lead the way – beginning right now – by slashing their (private) jet travel, limousines, mansions, 78-degree White House offices, Bali and Bonn excursions, and big-carbon-footprint eco-lobbying offices. And perhaps millions of Africans would be content to continue living in poverty and deprivation – when elite eco-activists move into their own electricity-free, disease-ridden huts. But until then, I don't foresee a citizens' stampede to the lifestyles of 50 to 110 years ago.

As my grandmother always told me, "The only good thing about the 'good old days' is that they're gone." She grew up doing backbreaking labor on a Wisconsin farmstead, and didn't have running water, indoor bathrooms or electricity until after she was married. I think her perspective is much more valuable than that of the climate alarm activists just mentioned.

Somehow I don't see any of them adopting the lifestyle of the deprived and unfamous. They have no business imposing it on anyone else, especially by telling impoverished Africans (et cetera) that they must continue living "indigenous" lifestyles, to save the planet.

This is where the hysteria about "runaway global warming" and "catastrophic sea level rise" has taken us.

Before we head any further down this path, we (and our putative leaders) need to take a long, cold, honest look at scientific, energy and economic realities ... our planet's history of climate change ... the absence of global warming over the past decade, even as CO2 levels continued to climb ... the views and findings of 700-plus climate scientists who do not agree with the IPCC Summaries for Policy Makers ... the enormous adverse impacts associated with biofuels ... the speculative worst-case scenarios conjured up by abjectly unreliable computer models ... the allegations, headlines and special effects that substitute for actual evidence in many circles ... and the unwillingness of too many climate alarmists to engage in debate or even valid peer review with climate realists and skeptics.

Only then will we have anything remotely approaching ethical, responsible, reality-based policies on energy, economic, health, living standards and developmental issues that right now are governed far too much by an unsupported assumption that catastrophic, anthropogenic, CO2-driven global warming threatens our planet.

Paul Driessen

Senior policy advisor, Congress of Racial Equality and Committee For A Constructive Tomorrow.