

TWO VIEWS ● *Is global warming a dire ecological threat that requires immediate attention or a theoretical nonissue?*

Rise in CO2 levels is no cause for alarm

By John Charles

The biggest problem with the public discussion of global warming is the tendency of environmental advocates to distort the facts and exaggerate future consequences. Messrs. Goodstein and Wolf do both by claiming that carbon dioxide (CO2) is a "pollutant" that will cause "weather of mass destruction."

In fact, CO2 is not a pollutant, either legally or scientifically. It is an essential element in the atmosphere that helps maintain life as part of the Earth's temperature-control system. There is no evidence that the recent rise in CO2 emissions has caused, or will cause, extreme weather events.

CO2 is a greenhouse gas, but the key scientific issue is the extent to which atmospheric CO2 generated by human sources affects global climate. The answer is not nearly as clear as some people believe. CO2 is created primarily by the burning of fossil fuels, but that same combustion process also generates other gases that have complex effects on climate, sometimes offsetting warming.

For example, most types of combustion create airborne particulates, or soot. Because soot is dark, it can warm the upper air by absorbing sunlight, and artificially cool the surface of the Earth.

Due to these and other factors,

such as cloud formation, the National Academy of Sciences recently concluded that "a causal linkage between the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the observed climate changes during the 20th century cannot be unequivocally established."

The call for increased regulation of greenhouse gases presumes that current climate patterns represent the norm and that any change must be bad. But climate has fluctuated wildly for millennia and will continue to do so regardless of whether we reduce our consumption of fossil fuels.

A rise in global temperatures may actually be beneficial. Increased CO2 stimulates plant growth, so one possible outcome of global warming would be enhanced agricultural production and increased biological diversity.

Those who demand that the government take drastic measures to reduce fossil fuel use ignore the fact that the U.S. economy has doubled its energy efficiency during the past 50 years. This has largely occurred through market forces, not regulation.

Moreover, economic growth no longer means an automatic rise in CO2. While the U.S. gross domestic

product grew by 32 percent from 1990 to 1999, energy-related CO2 emissions grew by only 12 percent. This means that we do not have to impose growth controls in order to minimize greenhouse gases; we simply have to encourage the continued technological innovation that is characteristic of a free-market economy.

The greatest worldwide environmental threat is not global warming; it's poverty. Millions of people die annually in developing countries be-

cause they lack adequate drinking water, sewage disposal or modern medicine.

Bjorn Lomborg, in his thoughtful book "The Skeptical Environmentalist," argues: "Implementation of the Kyoto Protocol (an international global-warming treaty rejected by the Bush administration) would likely cost at least \$150 billion per year, and possibly

much more. UNICEF estimates that just \$70 (billion) to \$80 billion a year could give all Third World inhabitants access to the basics like health, education, water and sanitation."

Instead of worrying about theoretical climate changes that we probably can't control anyway, we should focus on raising international standards of living. That will benefit the most people at the lowest cost and will better prepare us to cope with the future.

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