



THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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Anything But "Clear Skies"

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*This essay appeared in a modified form in **Cape Cod Today** on February 10, 2005. The original text follows.*

This month, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee begins its mark up of the proposed Clear Skies Initiative. The questions and concerns raised by this legislation are significant, and it is incumbent upon the members of the committee to consider in full the health and environmental effects of power plant emissions. The continued contamination of the landscape with mercury, and sulfur and nitrogen oxides will only contribute to the further impoverishment of the human environment. Furthermore, it is well past the time when emissions of carbon dioxide can be neglected from such legislation.

Many of the proposed changes in the Clear Skies Initiative dismantle progress made over the last 35 years in controlling air pollution in the United States:

- As set forth under the Clean Air Act, sulphur dioxide emissions are reduced to 2 million tons by 2012. The Clear Skies Initiative substantially weakens that, asking for a reduction to only 4.5 million tons by 2010. Why should restrictions on this major contributor to acid rain be relaxed?
- In addition, nitrogen oxide is set to achieve a reduction to 1.25 million tons by 2010. Under the Clear Skies Initiative, that is weakened to 2.1 million tons by 2008. Why should restrictions on this contributor to smog, and its effects on asthma and lung disease, be relaxed?
- Of pressing concern, too, is the lack of regulation regarding emissions of carbon dioxide. The Clean Air Act, discussed and established in the 1970s, was created before concerns about climatic effects were recognized. That has, of course, changed over time, so much so that in the 2000 election, now-president Bush promised that he would put forth legislation leading to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.
- The Clear Skies legislation should include a provision for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, one that is broadly effective, engaging both transportation and the production of electrical energy. It would be reasonable to anticipate a reduction in total carbon emissions on the order of 25 percent over a period as short as five years or less through drastic improvements in the efficiency of energy use and through the substitution of alternative and renewable energy sources for fossil fuels. Much more severe restrictions on emissions are necessary to meet the goals of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which has been ratified by the US and is our law.
- Carbon dioxide contributes more to global warming than all other man-made greenhouse gases combined. Reducing its emissions from power plants would help delay and reduce the disruptive effects of climate change, include rising sea levels, heat-caused mortality, increased severity of storms, and reductions in food production. Substitutions of alternative fuels to fossil fuels would also reduce the US dependence on foreign oil, help with the US balance of payments, and thereby release the US from being hostage to the price of oil. How do the arguments



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for relaxing the existing restrictions on the contamination of air, water and land stack up against these win-win solutions?

Members of the committee must consider fully the causes and effects of climate change. A selective review of the data and an insular view of what will occur are not appropriate for the elected leaders sworn to uphold the interests of the American people. Efforts to relax restrictions on contamination of air, water and land are direct affronts to human welfare.