

June 9, 2008  
KUFM / KGPR  
T. M. Power

### **Cap and Trade: A “Socialist Power Grab”?**

Last week the US Senate tried to begin debate on the first major piece of legislation to protect global climate stability by imposing mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions. That debate did not really get off the ground because the Bush Administration was able to round up enough votes to block the debate. But that debate will take place next year no matter who is elected President. Obama, McCain, and Clinton all support federal action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and something approaching a majority in Congress does too.

That developing consensus that we have to cap and then reduce greenhouse gas emissions has led to a hysterical response from energy-intensive industries and their lobbyists and supporters. The basic charge is that the regulation of greenhouse gasses represents a massive intrusion of the federal government into the economy and interference in the activities of almost every business and household. Since all of us in our daily activities directly or indirectly are responsible for the emission of greenhouse gases, that is partially true.

But that has been the history of the modern era. Ever since we started living on top of one another in ever growing, densely settled, urban areas and deploying energy intensive industrial processes, we have found that our neighbor's freedom can be our curse and that a business' productivity can be a community's poison.

Over a century, that has led to government regulation of milk, meat, and other foods to reduce the spread of disease. It has led to legal requirements that we inoculate

ourselves and our children against communicable diseases and even quarantine those stricken with certain diseases. It has led to restrictions on the use and release into the environment of poisonous substances such as lead, asbestos, radioactive materials, mercury, and a host of other deadly materials.

Beginning in the 1960s the nation began a major campaign to reduce the use of our public water supplies and the air we breathe as sewers into which industrial operations could dispose of their waste. New federal and state legislation sought to stop acid rain, revive dead rivers and lakes, and stop the destruction of the ozone layer that protects us from deadly ultraviolet radiation.

For a century or more, industry and their hired guns and purchased politicians have opposed all of these measures as restrictions on liberty and a hobbling of profitable business activity. They also pretended to mobilize science to prove that there was no reason for the public and, therefore, the government, to be concerned about the impact of these private business activities on public health and welfare.

One of the most outrageous industry misuses of science to lie to the public and the government was the tobacco industry's half-century-long cover-up of the deadly health effects of smoking. Many of the same "experts" and organizations that participated in producing that extravagant tobacco industry lie now are deployed to prove that asbestos does not threaten workers and families and, more recently, to prove that greenhouse gas emissions do not cause global warming.

For a century the political fear mongering has been the same: If we act to protect ourselves from the results of our industrial activity, we will enslave ourselves and bankrupt the economy. For a century industry has also tried to mobilize a manufactured

science to assure us that the disease, pollution, and destruction that confront us are not really all that bad for us. As far back as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, women in the Butte-Anaconda area were being told that the arsenic being released into the air by the smelting of copper was not only not a poison to them and their children but was actually beneficial since it encouraged a pallor in the complexion of their faces that was attractive to men.

It is true that the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions represents a vast public “taking” of resources that businesses and households have freely used for the entirety of human history. But our atmosphere has always been a public resource, not a private sewer. No private individual has a right to use the atmosphere upon which all of life depends in a way that threatens billions of people and all other forms of life. Free use was possible as long as that use did not damage other people and the larger community of living creatures.

The modern environmental movement grew out of that recognition. We as a people have already taken back control of our air and water from poisonous uses. That was what the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts were all about. There is no disputing the fact that modern environmental regulations represented a “socialization” of resources that industry previously freely used and abused. The costs of those environmental restrictions were no doubt in the hundreds of billions of dollars. There is also no doubt that the benefits in terms of our health and the health of the planet far exceeded that cost.

Global warming now confronts us with the greatest environmental challenge we have ever faced. It is not surprising that the same old political and pseudo-scientific

arguments are again being deployed by industry at an ever higher decibel level.

Hopefully we can look back at the hysterical claims made by industry in the past about how environmental regulation would impoverish our economy and enslave us and focus on what in fact the actual results were: improved health, more livable communities, and the protection of more of our natural heritage for the enjoyment of our children and grandchildren.