

Climate, Energy Real Problems

Daily News-Record (Harrisonburg, VA) - July 12, 2010

- Page: A4
- Readability: 9-12 grade level (Lexile: 1140)

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The time has come for all of us to think seriously about the problems of climate change and the sources of energy that we need for our cars and homes. The reasons for both problems are intertwined and revolve around coal, oil and natural gas.

Our dependence on fossil fuels has brought us to a terrible place. Our attempts to get at these fuels in hard-to-get-to places has led to death, destruction and ruining lives of survivors. The Gulf oil spill and the recent coal mine disasters, and hydrofracking for natural gas, are examples of where our desire for cheap energy has led us. Except we know fossil fuels are not cheap, either in the short or long run.

Our dependence on fossil fuels for our energy has led us to another terrible place: They are a major cause of overloading CO2 and other gases into our sky, leading to climate disruption and severe weather events that result in huge costs, human and financial. Continuing in this pattern is stupid and we need to change.

Now is the time to act. The U.S. Senate, which returns on July 12, will probably vote on a bill that will determine the future cost of fossil fuels in relationship to the cost of other energy sources that do not lead to death: solar, wind and geothermal. The true cost of fossil fuels is much greater than it appears on the surface, while the cost of clean, renewable energy will be much less with new technology.

Bill Gates and executives from Dupont, Xerox, GE, Lockheed Martin, among others, support an increase in research and development of renewable energy sources. Now, we as a nation spend less than \$3 billion on energy R&D and \$80 billion on defense R&D. As Bill Gates has written, having energy options is an issue of national security and requires a public commitment. He states we are neglecting energy R&D that is central to our national security.

Sens. Mark Warner and Jim Webb will have enormous pressure to vote against changes that would affect the profits of utility companies that are based on cheap coal to produce electricity. Dominion Power is the largest company and political donor in Virginia. Other fossil fuel interests will also be working hard to protect their quarterly profit reports.

I hope our senators will look to the legacy of Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia. He was an ardent supporter of his state and the people's welfare who realized that some issues were of such profound importance that he was compelled to take an unpopular stand for the long-term good of his constituents.

"Let's speak the truth," he said. He acknowledged that we, as a nation, need to encourage increased use of fuels other than coal. For six months during the last year of his life, Sen. Byrd worked to transition the coal industry to a lower-carbon economy, saying "the future of American industrial power and our economic ability to compete globally depends on our ability to advance energy technology."

The vote on a clean, renewable energy bill is one of those profoundly important votes. Bill Gates states that "energy innovation has never become politicized because Republicans, Democrats and Independents share a common interest in scientific breakthroughs that improve people's lives."

The public commitment Bill Gates says we need becomes real to the extent we tell our senators that we support climate change and energy legislation that will decrease deaths from dangerous fuels and extreme weather events and increase national security and prosperity.

Please let Sens. Warner and Webb know you count on them to courageously face the intense pressure of the fossil fuel lobbyists. Let's speak the truth: It's time to vote for serious energy progress for our health and security.

Mrs. Strickler lives in Harrisonburg.

- Record: 10003475
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