

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Are We Doing Enough to Protect Our Environment?

At a recent climate conference at the United Nations, a report was presented identifying what countries are doing to protect against climate change. The report, presented by Climate Action Network, took into account emission levels, emission trends and climate policy. The index ranks 56 countries that were part of a 1992 climate treaty or that contribute at least one percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. These 56 countries make up over 90 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, the major cause of global warming.

Of these 56 countries, the United States, the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases (the term used to describe carbon dioxide and several other gases contributing to global warming), is ranked 53, with only China, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia doing worse. China's growth is requiring more power plants and automobiles, the biggest contributors to carbon dioxide emissions. Malaysia probably can't afford to do anything, and Saudi Arabia, the country with the worst ranking, has policies to block attempts to reduce greenhouse gases – seems somewhat self-serving for the largest oil producer in the world.

China was expected to pass the U.S. in greenhouse gas emissions in about 2020, but at the rate that the country is going, it will reach the number one position in about three years. China has started to build one new large coal-fired power plant every week and will continue to do so for the next seven years. That is good news for the Chinese economy but it is bad news for the environment. China will be using old pulverized coal technology that is outdated and highly polluting. Some people might excuse this country because it is considered an emerging economy. I am not sure that is a good reason for ignoring cleaner technology.

But what about the U.S.? When a country is ranked near the bottom of a survey of polluting countries, you would think that it should do something about it. Are we? In the State of Texas, its biggest utility, TXU Power, has just announced its plans for a \$10 billion investment to build 11 power plants across the state and an additional 10 in other states. Like China, TXU will be using the same polluting technology that violates the Clean Air Act. If that is the case, how can the company build these power plants? Very simply, the Texas Governor instructed the state agencies to expedite the construction permit applications before the Clean Air Act would take affect. If the State of Texas was really concerned about the environment, it would require the use of advanced coal combustion technologies such as gasification. Twenty-five coal-gasification electric power plants have been proposed around the country and two have been in commercial operation for years. This attitude in Texas is not surprising as it is the home of five of the top ten power plants in the U.S. that emit the most toxic mercury.

This same attitude exists at the federal level as the Bush (former Texas governor) administration claims that it lacks the power to slow global warming by limiting the emission of harmful gases. It argues that greenhouse gases are not “air pollutants” under the Clean Air Act. But just a few weeks ago, a group of 12 states including Illinois is suing the Environmental Protection Agency for failing to properly do its job. These states, backed by environmental groups and scientists, say that the Clean Air Act requires the E.P.A. to impose limits on carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

Some of our other large electric utilities are concerned about the old polluting technologies and are planning clean coal-fired plants, like American Electric Power, the nation’s largest utility, which is building these clean plants in West Virginia and Ohio. Another utility, Xcel Energy, recently announced a proposal for the nation’s first coal power plant that will capture carbon dioxide before it is released into the atmosphere and store it underground. This company is also using an advanced technology that gasifies coal and then burns the gas to produce electricity, again much cleaner.

The U.S. could also follow the lead of countries like Sweden, Britain and Denmark that are at the top of Climate Action Network study. About one-quarter of the energy consumed in Sweden in 2003 came from renewable sources. In Stockholm, one-quarter of the city buses run on ethanol or biogas. There is no reason we couldn’t be doing something similar. With a Democratic congress in Washington, perhaps we will wake up and start to change.