

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

by
George P. Nassos

We Are Moving Too Slow to Mitigate Climate Change

Last month, over 200 nations met in Lima, Peru to determine how to mitigate climate change. The meeting resulted in an agreement to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of coal, oil and gas. However, it will be another year before any nation must disclose its plans to reduce the emissions when they all meet again in Paris in December 2015. No country will be legally bound to a specific reduction, but the hope is that peer pressure will result in both ambitious targets for the general good as well as good faith efforts at compliance. These discussions have been going on since the early 1990's which led to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. All the nations except the U.S. ratified that treaty but very little was done to meet to the targets. For example, the 15-year target of reducing carbon dioxide emission 5% below 1990 levels by 2012 led to an actual increase of 58%.

Some of the consequences of this increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can be catastrophic. For example, take the Greenland Ice Sheet which is the second largest body of ice in world. It is five times the size of New York State and Kansas combined. If the body of ice were to melt completely, the oceans could rise by as much as 20 feet, but it would probably take several centuries for it to happen. As the temperature of the ocean increases, the water expands which will cause an additional rise in the level. Melting of glaciers and icecaps will also contribute to the sea level rise making it catastrophic for the coastal cities. Given how little we have progressed, we can't afford just another attempt to cap carbon emissions in Paris later this year. Something more than just talk is crucial.

In a recent paper by James Hansen, one of the world's leading experts in climate change, he suggests that the Paris Protocol could lead to two different outcomes. One would be to adopt goals similar to the Kyoto Protocol and reduce emissions slightly but continue business as usual when referring to fossil fuel use. It would even be worse than ever as fossil fuel extraction is now requiring more environmentally detrimental processes such as fracking and oil from tar sands

The other outcome would be to impose a rising carbon fee after a quorum of nations approves it through each of their legislatures. The quorum would be defined as acceptance by the United States or the EU along with either China or a combination of other emerging economies like Brazil and India. The gradually rising carbon fee would be accompanied by border duties on products from non-participating nations, collected by the importing country, unless the exporting country shows that no fossil fuel carbon was emitted in production of the product.

Once a quorum is achieved, there is a major incentive for other nations to join, to avoid economic disadvantage and enjoy the economic stimulation. A carbon fee, which would be collected at the source of the fossil fuel, would spur the economy if the funds are fully distributed to the citizens. If a government keeps the funds to expand its programs, the fee becomes a tax and it becomes a drag on the economy. Governments are prohibited from returning the funds to the fossil fuel industry as subsidies. Otherwise specific use of the fee is a national prerogative.

With the cost of fossil fuels currently being so low, it is the ideal time to impose the carbon fee. The citizens that are more conscious about reducing the consumption of fossil fuels will pay less in the form of the carbon fee and would therefore receive more of distributed carbon fee than paid out. And the phase-down of our fossil fuel addiction will be set in motion.

I believe this is a great idea, and it should be put in motion. But how do we get the political leaders to make it happen? As James Hansen recommends, we need organizations like the Citizens Climate Lobby, PathwaytoParis.org, Our Children's Trust, and 350.org to take the lead to convince the country leaders while embracing the public.