

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

by
George P. Nassos

What Can We Expect for 2011?

As I have mentioned in earlier articles, we are confronted with many environmental issues, but I consider the Big Four as: 1) water quality and scarcity, 2) need for renewable energy to replace the depleting fossil fuels, 3) global warming or better yet called “global weirding” (the world climate is doing some weird things), and 4) population growth and poverty. Are we getting closer to solving these problems? I am afraid to say, “No”.

A good example of a complete lack of progress is the two most recent meetings devoted to reducing carbon emissions worldwide. In December of 2009 and 2010, representatives from close to 200 countries gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark and Cancun, Mexico, respectively, to discuss how the world can work together to reduce carbon emissions. Unfortunately, very little was accomplished at either conference, and the U.S. was probably to blame as much as any country. In 2009, President Obama went to Copenhagen with little support from Congress and even less support last month. The U.S. fossil fuel energy companies are too powerful, and they are making sure that nothing gets passed in Congress that will restrict the profitability of their companies.

You may also recall that last month, Congress extended the tax cuts that were initiated during the Bush administration. Obama was against the tax cuts, but with the stronger Republican presence, a compromise was made and the tax cuts were passed. But included in the bill was a rider that provides an additional \$6 billion in farm subsidies for corn-derived ethanol. If you remember, one of the biggest energy bills passed by a bi-partisan Congress in the past 20 years was the one to produce ethanol from corn – one of the worst energy bills ever passed as the process is inefficient and too much land was taken from food production. It is no coincidence that the largest contributor to the Congressional lobby during this period was ADM, the largest producer of ethanol from corn.

About seven years ago, the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCX) was formed to provide a voluntary system to reduce carbon emissions. This was, by far, the largest such activity devoted to reducing emissions and was the parent of the European Climate Exchange, the largest such exchange for the E.U. Because the U.S. has not passed any carbon emission bills, there is no incentive for any company to reduce its emissions and as a result the CCX no longer exists.

For the past century, the U.S. has been one of the most admired countries in the world, if not THE most admired due to its democracy, opportunities, innovations, growth, etc. However, today we are losing that edge as we are doing little to reduce emissions

and we have major financial problems. Thomas Friedman, the New York Times columnist, saw an example of this loss of respect depicted by a billboard ad a couple years ago in South Africa by Daimler Benz promoting their Smart Car called the “For-Four”. In large letters, it says “German Engineering, Swiss Innovation, and American Nothing”. We are slowly losing our edge.

Friedman also makes an excellent point about our lack of initiative relative to curbing carbon emissions. What would you do if you might be confronted with an event that has a one percent chance of occurring, but if it does happen, it would be catastrophic, irreversible, and disruptive? You would, no doubt, buy insurance. That is exactly what we need to do relative to climate change. The probability of climate change being catastrophic, irreversible and disruptive is, however, much greater than one percent, probably more like 90%. Yet we are not “buying” the necessary insurance to combat it.

We started designing green buildings, depicted by LEED certifications, some ten years ago. I have been saying for the past eight to ten years that all, and I mean 100%, buildings should follow LEED guidelines even if the owner does not seek the certification. There are many environmental, social and economic benefits in designing a “green” building. This should become the standard. In fact, everything we do that could have a green component should adopt the green component. The word “green” should disappear except when talking about the color.

I am not too optimistic that we, the U.S., will initiate the necessary programs to reduce carbon emissions during the next two years, and this is just one of the “Big Four”. We must do it now because later may be too late.