

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

by
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What Comes After the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference?

Two months ago, I wrote about what to expect in the very important conference on climate change that was held in Copenhagen last December. If you recall, in June 2009 the House passed the Waxman-Markey bill, more commonly known as the Cap-and-Trade bill, referring to placing a cap on the quantity of carbon dioxide emitted by companies and utilities and allowing the emitters to buy or sell carbon credits if they emit more or less than they are allowed, respectively.

As I had indicated, this bill was very weak in terms of targets such as by 2020 reducing emissions 17% below 2005 levels, which is only 4% below 1990 levels (baseline set by the Kyoto Protocol). This reduction is not much more than doing nothing – something that would be achieved by a small downturn in our economy. To me this would be an embarrassment for the U.S. in that we are the second biggest emitter of green house gases (GHG) behind China, and we would be attending this important conference with no program in place to show the rest of the world what we are planning to do. In any event, President Obama decided to attend by stating that the content of the Waxman-Markey bill would be implemented by the U.S. despite being criticized that he didn't have the right to commit the U.S. without congressional approval.

Coincidentally, the week before the conference, the U.S. EPA established a new regulation that would limit the quantity of GHG emitted by companies and utilities that generate over 25,000 tons per year. But should EPA regulate carbon dioxide as a pollutant? Is it really a pollutant? This is a gas that puts bubbles in pop. It puts holes in bread. It puts out fires. It becomes dry ice. It is not noxious and not caustic. It doesn't damage our lungs and doesn't poison the ecosystems. But why is it being regulated? Their argument is that it does cause harm by increasing the earth's temperature.

According to CNN, at least 20 congressmen led by Nancy Pelosi traveled to Copenhagen on three military jets along with their spouses and children. In addition, many senators traveled there on commercial flights. I am not sure why the U.S. needed so many high powered people when they went there with no policy in place. Despite this excessively large and expensive entourage, nothing positive really came of this conference. Fortunately, everyone agrees that we cannot exceed a 2° C. increase in global temperature

At the beginning of the conference, everyone was talking about "80% by 2050", meaning a reduction of 80% below 1990 levels by 2050 would put us on target of curbing global warming. By the end of the week, drafts including this statement vanished. The major problem was that China did not like the numbers in the draft agreement. Part of

their argument is that they have had a 51% growth in renewable energy output over the last three years, they have planted 50 million acres of forests over the past five years, and that the developed countries are responsible for 80% of the generated emissions over the past 200 years.

Typical of most governments, at least America's, it was time for one-on-one negotiations. China satisfied one of the requests by the U.S. which was the principle of "monitoring, reporting and verification". If a country is to make a commitment, it is critical that other countries can confirm it is really happening. In addition, China has pledged a reduction of 40-45% by 2020 in the level of its "carbon intensity" – the amount of carbon emitted in proportion to its output. The U.S., in turn, pledged to help raise \$100 billion per year by 2020 to assist the developing countries in their efforts to combat carbon emissions. In effect, the real conclusion of the Copenhagen conference is another wait-and-see until the next meeting in Mexico City on November 29, 2010. And if an international binding treaty is to be accepted at this meeting, it may take a number of years for it to be ratified by all the countries. Then we would be approaching 2020 with little have been accomplished. I hope I am wrong.

There is another problem that has developed as a result of the Copenhagen failure. The inability to agree on a global mechanism to put a price on emissions makes it unlikely for companies to justify big investments in unproven technologies. Reducing carbon emissions is very critical and we have just lost another year. In the meantime, China will probably develop clean technologies and become the world leader in this field – more jobs and more money to China.