

THE DAILY CALLER

Fossil fuels have made the earth cleaner, not dirtier

Michael Bastasch

04/22/2014

Tuesday marks the 44th Earth Day and the planet has never looked cleaner thanks to fossil fuels.

Environmentalists often use this day to warn that using fossil fuels, like coal and oil, will continue to harm the planet and cause global warming. But government data shows that the U.S. has become greener even as fossil fuel use exploded.

“The incredible advances in human flourishing and economic growth over the past two and a half centuries were made possible by a technological revolution that harnessed underground energy from coal, oil, and natural gas,” Myron Ebell, director of international energy and global warming policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

Economists generally argue that environmental protection becomes a higher priority the wealthier a country gets. Fossil fuels, like coal and oil, have enabled the U.S. and many other countries to rapidly grow their economies and focus more on environmental protection.

“Countries with access to more energy have populations that are healthier and live longer and also have higher environmental quality than energy-poor countries,” Ebell added. “And coal, oil, and natural gas are not yesterday’s fuels; they remain the basis of global prosperity and continue to contribute to a healthier, cleaner environment.”

In the last three decades, the environmental quality of the U.S. has [improved dramatically](#), contrary to what many environmental activists argue. [Environmental Protection Agency data shows](#) that from 1980 to 2012 emissions of six common air pollutants have dropped 67 — all while the economy grew 133 percent, energy use increased 27 percent, and the population jumped up by 38 percent.

These huge advances in air quality were also accompanied by a huge increase in the amount of forest land since the 1980s. [According to the U.S. Forest Service](#), 20 million acres of forest land

have been added since that time, and now the U.S. has the same amount of forest land it had about 100 years ago despite huge population increases.

Water quality has also improved. In 1993, 79 percent of public water systems did not violate contamination laws. This number rose to [94 percent of public water systems](#) without contamination in 2008.

These huge strides in environmental protection have also come as U.S. fossil fuel production and use has grown. In 1980, the U.S. [consumed](#) about 17 million barrels of oil per day, in 2007 — before the recessions — the country used nearly 21 million barrels per day. The same goes for natural gas and coal.

“We are fortunate in this country to have benefitted greatly from fossil-based energy, which largely powers everything we do from the moment the alarm clock rings until the lights are turned off at night,” Laura Sheehan, spokeswoman for the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, told TheDCNF. “A world without fossil-based energy, particularly from low-cost, reliable fuel sources like coal, would be plagued by darkness and poverty, creating an environment no one would strive to achieve.”

Despite increasing air and water quality and sprawling forestlands, environmentalists continue to sound the alarm on global warming. They argue that using fossil fuels is increasing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide which is, in turn, warming the planet.

“We are seeing the impacts of climate change all around us, and the world’s leading scientists continue to warn us of the urgent need to cut carbon pollution now to avoid lasting changes to our planet,” [said California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer](#) in a statement on Earth Day. “Rest assured that on this Earth Day and every day, I will keep fighting to take action on climate change and to protect the health of our children and families.”

But in recent years fossil fuels have actually contributed to making energy more affordable while lowering the U.S.’s carbon footprint. The U.S. natural gas boom has helped provide cheap energy to households and businesses while also lowering carbon dioxide emissions.

Carbon dioxide emissions have fallen 12 percent since 2007 due to utilities switching from burning coal to natural gas. Natural gas emits less CO₂ when burned to generate electricity. The advent of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, has allowed drilling companies to access vast shale reserves which have brought down gas prices and incentivized utilities to engage in fuel switching.

“The inconvenient truth for environmentalists who oppose oil and gas is that, thanks to fracking, U.S. carbon emissions are at their lowest level in 20 years,” Steve Everley, spokesman for the oil and gas industry-backed Energy In Depth, told TheDCNF.

“You cannot credibly argue that reducing greenhouse gas emissions is the single greatest challenge facing humankind, and then turn around and oppose the technologies that are actually

reducing those emissions. In an interesting twist of irony, many in the environmental movement are advocating not only for a weaker economy, but also for a worse environment.”

Even the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognized that fracking has helped to lower carbon dioxide emissions and fight global warming.

“The shale gas revolution can be very consistent with low-carbon development – that is quite clear. It can be very helpful as a bridge technology,” [said Ottmar Edenhofer](#), co-chair of the IPCC group responsible for the latest climate report.

But the IPCC and environmentalists concern over runaway global warming may be unfounded, as the planet has not warmed in the last 17 years. Global temperatures have actually cooled slightly since the late 1990s, according to climate scientists, all while carbon dioxide emissions have increased by [1.5 times from 1990 to 2008](#).

“Let’s allow that the carbon dioxide emitted from the combustion of fossil fuels has slightly warmed the lower atmosphere, though the amount is clearly much less than has been forecast by the UN’s computer models,” Pat Michaels, director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute, told TheDCNF.

“But that same technology has, in the last 100 years, been associated with a doubling of life expectancy in the developed world, and a tenfold influence in real personal wealth,” Michaels added. “Why do we chose to ignore this on Earth Day?”