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Rebutting foes of further cuts for greenhouse gas emissions

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Recently proposed limitations on greenhouse gas emissions from coal power plants have elicited a predictable torrent of critical commentary from the usual sources.

Leading the charge is Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma (whose native state came close to melting last summer) with his usual rallying cry that global warming is a hoax (presumably hatched by tens of thousands of independent scientists from countries of all political persuasions).

Not far behind him comes the fossil fuel-funded Heartland Institute and its president, Joseph Bast, reissuing efforts to discredit the fact that the vast majority of scientists in fields related to climate science is convinced that global warming is real, that in contrast to the past it is now largely driven by greenhouse gas emissions, and that it poses real threats to our future well being and security as it moves us ever closer to climate conditions never before experienced during the human era on Earth.

Heartland techniques are drawn from its earlier experience in trying to discredit research on dangers of tobacco smoke.

On the climate change front, Heartland's hit squad distorts the methodology and findings of the leading studies of scientists' beliefs and even attempts to reintroduce the laughable Petition Project, which gathered 31,000 signatures from the millions asked to sign without revealing that only a handful of the signers had any climate research experience whatsoever.

This is unsurprising since the orchestrator of the petition was none other than Frederick Seitz, one of the leaders in arguing that tobacco smoke is good for us. His efforts were publicly condemned by the National Academy of Sciences which labeled the petition "a deliberate effort to mislead".

When the fog of efforts to discredit science clears we are left with rapidly escalating evidence that warming, including sea along with surface temperatures, is continuing; that sea temperature increases promise a return to air surface temperature warming leaving well behind the record set in 2010; that Antarctica and Greenland continue melting thus promising problematic sea level rise well before 2100; and that flooding and drought events are likely to become significantly more frequent all unless worldwide greenhouse gas emissions are reined in. In short, those arguing that the annual release of a million years of stored carbon, our current

rate, has no significant effect on climate are engaging in radical head-in-the sandism.

The real question, then, is how to stop pushing the climate in potentially dangerous directions? One partial remedy is the proposed reductions in carbon emissions from coal fired plants. Once again Heartland's Bast jumped into action announcing that because of the new regulations "millions of Americans will be freezing in the dark." How well do his assertions and those of Sen. Inhofe, the Cato Institute and selected politicians stand up to the facts? Well as it turns out, many states have already taken significant steps to meet the carbon emission goals; 10 of them in fact have already met the 30 percent reduction goals, and as it turns out the lights are still on and utility bills have remained unchanged or fallen, by as much as 7 percent in the Northeast. Generally the more dependent a state is on coal the higher its utility bills. Furthermore, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce issued an estimate that regulations will cost up to \$50 billion in new annual expenditures; in an economy of \$17 trillion that amounts to 0.003 percent! Not exactly devastating since the product of the extra investment, if any is required, will be a more robust and ultimately more economical energy network replacing our average 42-year-old, inefficient coal plants.

Market factors, as much or more than new regulations, are hastening coal to an inevitable demise. Natural gas is significantly less expensive, and solar and wind also will be as the technologies improve. There is no doubt that the end of coal dependence will be painful for many of the country's remaining miners, whose numbers have declined by two-thirds since the late 1970s primarily because of the industry's shift to less labor-intensive mining. But further decline in coal employment will be a bonanza for natural gas and alternative energy workers.

As for other effects, the states already taking the largest steps toward reducing carbon emissions have experienced above average economic performance. The workings of the free market have always produced winners and losers, generally to the greater good. It is difficult to believe that because of earlier transitions we are worse off having fewer blacksmiths and more auto mechanics.

Lower reliance on coal will lead to better air quality and greater health for us as individuals, for our climate and for our economy.