



Right-wing rag's climate delusion: Debunking National Review's latest fiction

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The Obama administration's move to cap carbon emissions from existing power plants has touched off the expected round of climate change denialism from conservatives. The president, according to the right-wing logic, is (probably illegally) using his powers to enforce the ideological zealotry of the environmental movement and punish the coal industry, whose only crime was to provide cheap, filthy, mercury-tinged power to the American people.

The reactions come in various flavors of stupid and there's certainly no shortage of them, but I want to focus specifically on National Review. The magazine is celebrated as an intellectual force in conservative politics, but on climate change it's fairly reactionary. They have a climate change blog called "Planet Gore" (like Al Gore because haha Al Gore get it?) devoted specifically to tracking "news, data, and misinformation that feed the global-warming/climate-change debate," while providing "accurate information about fossil fuels." A typical National Review climate change [headline](#) reads "Why the IPCC Report Neglects the Benefits of Global Warming."

The magazine published two pieces on the EPA regulations, one of which was an [editorial](#) arguing against them (obviously). To build their case, the editors claimed that even if climate change were real and terrible – which, remember, it isn't – this one action wouldn't fix the problem so why even bother? Instead, let's just keep pumping out all that carbon while we wait to roast/drown/die in a war fought for control over arable, non-desert land:

Even if we swallow whole the most alarmist version of the global-warming story, the phenomenon is inescapably a global one. In order for the United States to make national cuts that are of global significance, they would have to be substantially larger than anything under current consideration, and reducing emissions from coal-fired plants exclusively would be nowhere near sufficient. And that assumes that the rest of the world stands still, which is unlikely to be the case in consideration of the second reality: Coal does not care where it is burned. If we reduce demand for coal in the United States by substituting other fuels in our electricity plants, that does not transform a corresponding sum of the world's coal deposits into fairy dust. It will still be coal, and it will still be useful for producing electricity elsewhere.

National Review's reasoning is that if we don't burn the coal, then China and India will just burn it for us. And since we're deciding to cut back on coal, that reduction in demand will just drive coal prices lower, which means more of it will be burned. "This is an emissions-reduction program that is as likely to increase emissions as to reduce them, if not more likely," the editors posit, citing the respected economic analysis of precisely nobody.

This "nothing matters we're all going to die anyway" argument might be compelling if China and India didn't have a strong incentive not to kill their own people with coal emissions. Burning coal without abandon has indeed helped those two countries rapidly grow their economies, but at the cost of enrobing their cities in thick, toxic smog. The Chinese in particular are [coming to terms](#) with [how much damage they've done to the air](#) and to the lungs of the people who breathe it, and they're making noises about [reducing coal emissions](#) and switching to cleaner fuels.

But taking action on climate change is difficult, which is why China and India also complain that they shouldn't have to act alone. Leaders from both countries [have said](#) that for any meaningful progress to occur on an international level, the United States and other wealthy countries would have to take the first steps towards curbing emissions. Now that Obama has done just that, he's put pressure on the Chinese and Indians to tend to their own houses.

So really, the EPA regulations are actually an example of the global leadership that conservatives constantly say the world has been missing under Obama. Except he's leading on climate change, which, we've already established, is a completely fake hoax so it doesn't count.

The emptiness of federal action on climate change was also a theme touched on by Patrick J. ~~Smith~~ Michaels, head of the Cato Institute's Center for the Study of Science, who [wrote in National Review](#) a few days ago that big government fixes to climate issues are "futile" and born of hysteria:

The politics of scaring people to death over climate change are probably more dangerous than the weather. And research suggests that the more people read that some "scientists say" the world is about to end, the less they believe them.

Chalk it up to apocalypse fatigue. By my best guess, global warming is the eighth environmental Armageddon I have lived through. Who even remembers that, according to some of our most esteemed scientists, "acid rain" was going to cause an "ecological silent spring"? Like so many global catastrophes, it was a bit exaggerated.

Yeah! Who even talks about "acid rain" anymore, which we're putting in quotes because it never really existed, right?

The reason concern over acid rain has fallen from its peak in the late 80s and early 90s is that effective federal programs were put in place to curb the emissions that cause it. In 1990 the Clean Air Act was updated and the Acid Rain Program was formed, which sought to cut back the emission of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides into the air. In 2012 the US Geological Survey [released a report](#) on the progress of the Acid Rain Program:

The report shows that since the establishment of the Acid Rain Program, under Title IV of the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments, there have been substantial reductions in sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x) emissions from power plants that use fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil, which are known to be the primary causes of acid rain. As of 2009, emissions of SO₂ and NO_x declined by about two-thirds relative to levels in the 1990s. These emissions levels declined even further in 2010, according to recent data compiled by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

So in arguing that federal anti-pollution programs are “futile,” Smith cited as evidence a wildly effective federal anti-pollution measure. It worked so well that the problem it was created to fix dropped completely from the public consciousness, thus enabling hacks like Smith to sniff contemptuously about the “acid rain” problem that disappeared as if by magic.

It’s completely stupid and derives from the false assumption – held near universally by conservatives – that climate change is a fraud. When that’s your starting point, it’s easy for nonsense like this to pass for an informed criticism of the environmental movement.