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Another View - Chip Knappenberger: The EPA's new emissions regulations will not cool the planet

By Chip Knappenberger
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THE EPA HAS announced a set of ambitious and potentially onerous new regulations aimed at reducing the carbon dioxide emissions from existing power plants in the U.S. by 30 percent by the year 2030. The regulations are part of President Obama's plan to "lead by example" when it comes to tackling climate change.

But there is an underlying scientific truth that the EPA and President Obama do not want to reveal. The effort, no matter how large, to restrict carbon dioxide emissions from the U.S. will have no scientifically detectable impact of the future course of the weather and climate at any scale, global, regional or local.

So it doesn't matter whether the EPA proposes regulations to reduce power plant emissions by 30 percent by 2030, or by 50 percent, or even 100 percent by tomorrow. Aside from the varying degrees of economic and social chaos that will arise, the impact on the climate will be the same. None.

The same is true for the impact on the weather. The future will still hold all manner of extreme events like tornadoes, hurricanes, droughts, floods, heat waves and blizzards. And nobody will be able to detect any change in their characteristics resulting from the EPA actions to restrict carbon dioxide emissions.

This is not because carbon dioxide emissions from human activities don't add a pressure for the earth's temperature to rise; they do. But it is because the level of natural noise in the climate system is high, and because the relative U.S. contribution to the global carbon dioxide emissions total is meager and in rapid decline.

The days of carbon dioxide emissions from the U.S. and other developed countries dominating the world's total are behind us. Going forward, it is the developing nations like China and India and their efforts to bring improved energy access to their large populations that have the greatest impact on future climate change. For example, mainstream projections of climate change between now and the end of the century are for the earth's average surface temperature to increase by about 2.5° C. Of that rise, about 2.2° C is expected to come from carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas

emissions from the developing world. Of the remaining 0.3° C of projected temperature rise, the U.S. portion is expected to be about half of that, or about 0.15° C. That's it. That's all the warming that the President and the EPA are able to thwart. But they are not keen on telling you that.

They avoid talking about how much future climate change the new regulations will avert, and instead, throw out some impressive-sounding numbers about aspects other than the climate. For example, in introducing the new regulations, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said that by 2030, the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions resulting from the regulations would be “like cancelling out annual carbon pollution from two-thirds of all cars and trucks in America.” What she didn't tell you was that according to the EPA's own models, two-thirds of all the cars and trucks in America contribute much less than one one-thousandth of a degree of global warming per year. This number is impressive as well—impressively tiny.

So much so, that you begin to wonder as to the overall net result of the EPA regulations. With such an insignificant impact on the climate, they certainly will not lead to safeguarding the “health of our kids” through climate change mitigation, as President Obama likes to say. In fact, I am pretty sure that we'll do this job whether or not the climate is changing. They certainly will lead to higher energy prices—which drives the price of everything else up. Job losses will almost assuredly follow. And there is the potential for increasing the risk to the reliability of our energy supply—which would increase the risk for negative health consequences.

In fact, as far as most analysts can see (aside from those in the EPA), the risk for negative outcomes from these regulations exceeds positive ones.

There is a subtle distinction between setting an example and being made an example of. By pursuing the former, the President and the EPA are liable to achieve the latter.

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