

Global warming - it's real. It's here. It's time to tackle this problem

by Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

No one can seriously argue anymore that global warming isn't happening and that human activity isn't a significant part of the cause. The question now is what to do about it.

The summary of the latest report by an international panel of scientists put together by the United Nations says that global warming is a reality and that it is very likely -- a 90 percent probability, the panel says -- that human activity in the form of greenhouse gas emissions is making a significant contribution to the warming trend. The full report won't be available until May, but the summary for policymakers recently released makes clear what the final report will say.

Yes, there are still serious questions on the details -- just how much the average temperature will increase, how high sea levels will rise, how crops and the environment will be affected -- but the crux of the matter has been settled.

Now, the debate needs to move to policy issues and questions of how to best mitigate the effect. The most important question to ask is not what the world will be like 20 or 30 years from now but what it will be like 100 or 200 years from now if nothing is done.

Since it's a global problem, the warming trend requires a global response. There will be winners and losers, and some will bear more of the cost than others. Mitigating global warming won't be easy, and it won't be cheap. But spread the cost as broadly as possible -- share the pain -- and it should not be unbearable for any single country or people.

The basic answer lies in reducing the consumption of fossil fuels and reducing the emissions of the fuels when they are used.

Everything should be on the table. This includes a new international agreement on global warming, new taxes on oil and on carbon emissions, rewarding conservation, placing caps on emissions, promoting mass transit and the research of alternative fuels and finding safer ways to dispose of nuclear waste. Yes, nuclear power -- which emits nothing -- can be a part of the solution if the will and a way can be found to deal with the significant problems caused by nuclear waste.

So can energy-efficiency and the development of technology that, for example, would allow buildings to use less energy to heat or cool.

Internationally, a new agreement is necessary to supplant the ineffective and unpopular Kyoto treaty. That new agreement needs to spell out the responsibilities of each country and set limits on greenhouse gas emissions. And it needs to include China, India and other nations that are rapidly expanding their economies and their use of fossil fuels. Chinese leaders are right when they say that wealthier countries need to take the lead on curbing emissions, but China needs to commit to being part of the solution.

Nationally, a federal tax on oil consumption -- perhaps in conjunction with a tax on carbon emissions -- needs to be considered. Consumers aren't likely to cut back on driving or to buy vehicles that use less gasoline unless consuming gasoline becomes more expensive. Utilities will no doubt pass along the costs of any carbon emissions tax to ratepayers, so perhaps some sort of subsidy could help offset the cost. New investments will have to be made in clean coal technology, but the most significant increase should come in non-fossil fuel alternatives. Right now, that means biomass, wind and solar, but more is needed, and President Bush's initiatives -- announced in his State of the Union address -- are a step in the right direction.

In Wisconsin, Gov. Jim Doyle has taken a bigger step with his call for a state task force on global warming and a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Other measures should include a reconsideration of the state's heavy reliance on coal plants. Because of that reliance, Wisconsin's emissions have grown faster than the average of other states, as the first installment in a series of articles on global warming points out in the Journal Sentinel.

That reconsideration should include a very careful look by the state Public Service Commission at a proposal by Alliant Energy Corp. of Madison, Wis., to build a new coal plant in southwestern Wisconsin. The PSC needs to ask just how badly the plant is needed and whether alternatives could meet the need. We Energies, which is building two coal plants in Oak Creek, Wis., says it is experimenting with cleaner coal technology at its Pleasant Prairie, Wis., plant. Such experiments need more of a push.

Do state residents really want to place such a heavy reliance on coal when it is likely that they will be paying a greater price for use of that coal, perhaps through a tax on carbon emissions or a cap on those emissions?

Consumers also need to start thinking about what they can do to curb their use of fossil fuels. This includes driving less, buying more fuel-efficient cars and energy-saving light bulbs and using the furnace and air conditioner a little less. One family turning down the thermostat may not mean much. But a million families doing so makes a difference.

Just what effect global warming will have remains an open question. The U.N. panel offers six scenarios, ranging from an almost negligible effect to far more dire consequences. In most, sea level increases are actually less than earlier predictions.

But even if the final result is less serious than some fear, reducing the consumption of fossil fuels will still leave the world a better place with less smog, less small-particle pollution and reduced ozone levels. Doing whatever it takes to mitigate global warming will be worth the effort and will help make the world of 2107 one worth living in.

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