

Questioning Cap and Trade

by Living on Earth
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Civil rights environmental groups could throw a monkey wrench into California's creation of a trading system for greenhouse gas emissions. Other states often copy California's approach but the grassroots groups say, not so fast. Host Steve Curwood speaks with an economist and an attorney about cap and trade's unintended consequences. (6:00)

Living on Earth radio interview with Jane Williams of California Communities Against Toxics.

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CURWOOD: It's Living on Earth, I'm Steve Curwood. With all the major Presidential candidates embracing the idea of a cap and trade system to deal with greenhouse gas emissions, it begins to look like a done deal. But, as California prepares to implement its own cap and trade plan, the state is meeting opposition from some grass-roots environmental activists. It's an echo of the debate that threatened to derail the Kyoto agreement a decade ago.

Back then, the Europeans argued that strict limits should be set and nobody - no nations or businesses - should be able to buy their way out. To the U.S., that was a deal-breaker. And in the end, trade was in. Now the carbon trade is a billion dollar global business, even though the U.S. eventually backed out of Kyoto altogether.

California's law also calls for a cap and trade system, and now some 20 environmental justice groups have issued a declaration against it. One charge - that the carbon trading in offset programs under Kyoto has actually led to more emissions.

Jane Williams of California Communities Against Toxics.

WILLIAMS: Those offset programs have gone to actually increase fossil fuel production. So you're going to extract methane in a coal seam in Africa, while the coal is being mined to be shipped to Germany to be burned in a coal-fired power plant.

I mean you're having oppressive impacts in environmental justice communities in the global South and you're not solving the structural problem of: in order for us to maintain a reasonable climate on the planet, most of the carbon that's in the ground has to stay in the ground. We can't concoct schemes to move pollution around while we're still essentially extracting, you know, millions of tons of carbon from the ground and putting it in the air.

CURWOOD: And while CO2 affects the world, the pollutants often released with it, such as sulfur dioxide and soot particles, known as PM, have strong local impacts.

Angela Johnson-Meszaros of the California Environmental Rights Alliance is here to lay out her concerns. So Angela, is it that eco-justice advocates worry trading schemes will make it easier for new power plants and refineries to be built in disadvantaged communities?

JOHNSON-MESZAROS: Well, it's clear that communities of color, low-income communities in California and around the

United States, host our fossil fuel infrastructure. We believe that there's a very clean policy approach that can allow us to address two really significant issues at the same time for mutual benefit. One is the climate problem - the overall climate issue. Carbon is global, but the fact is that its co-pollutants are local. So if you've got a refinery in your community, you're not worried about the carbon in terms of direct emissions, you're worried about the PM. But, because you live on the planet, you are worried about the carbon. It's a two-part problem, and so if we were able to address the fossil fuel infrastructure, we would be able to address a large portion of the health impacts that communities of color are burdened by right now.

CURWOOD: So, what's one of the scenarios under cap and trade that most concerns you, Angela?

JOHNSON-MESZAROS: My concern is that we try to implement a trading program, something frankly that's never successfully been implemented everywhere. And then we start to spend five, six years working out the kinks, figuring out where are the verification issues, where are the reporting issues. You know, the argument is that you would have this cap, it would decline over time. That's not going to get us there in time. Most economists, and many leading thinkers on this issue agree, that a carbon fee would be the way to do it, so in California, the fee that's collected by the government would have to go directly to reducing carbon emissions, paying for a new fossil fuel free infrastructure.

CURWOOD: You know that solution has been seen as politically impossible to pass legislatively. Angela, what makes you think it could be politically viable?

JOHNSON-MESZAROS: Well, what we're trying to do is raise the point that we've got to move beyond questions about whether or not its politically viable. The fundamental question is 'will it save the planet?' and when we grapple with the fundamental question, that should outline what our solutions are.

So, is it politically viable? I actually think that it is, and let me tell you why. I think it's politically viable because fundamentally people care about climate change. They fundamentally care about protecting the planet and maintaining a livable earth. And if we give people the clear choice - would you like to try this trading program, which politically - for the people who are the lobbyists and the people who are running the fossil fuel industry - we can try this trading program to see if it works out, or we can undertake policy solutions that are going to address the problem, I think that people will choose to address the problem.

So, we have to say to our decision makers, 'no, you need to listen to us, the people who live on the planet and who are working to protect the planet and communities, and you need to put in place a system that's actually going to work.'

CURWOOD: Al Gore had his head handed to him in the summer of '93 with a carbon tax- BTU tax-

JOHNSON-MESZAROS: Right. And then he came out for trading, and then when he accepted the Nobel Prize, he was back at a tax.

CURWOOD: So, easy to say out of office, hard to say in office.

JOHNSON-MESZAROS: The people who are most vested in a trading program have a lot of influence on policy construction. We can't let that stop us from addressing climate.

CURWOOD: Angela Johnson-Meszaros is general council with the California Environmental Rights Alliance. Thank you, Angela.

JOHNSON-MESZAROS: Thank you.

Related links:

- More information on environmental justice groups' opposition to carbon trading
- California's Environmental Justice Advisory Committee gives input on CA's carbon cap law
- To read California's Assembly Bill No. 32, the carbon cap law, click here

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