The Policy Drought on Climate Change

The holiday season here in the United States was ushered in by a long-awaited report, heralded as laying out the administration’s research agenda for climate change. It should interest those in the United States who may have been expecting something meaningful from their government, along with those in Europe and elsewhere who have come to expect disappointment.

The draft strategic plan for the combined U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP) and Climate Change Research Initiative (CCRI) will not surprise the second audience and will tell the first that it has fallen victim to yet another triumph of hope over experience. This long report, available at http://globalchange.gov/#USGCRP-CCRI, offers a smorgasbord of moderate-intensity research efforts but merely urges more study on the role of anthropogenic sources in global warming. And it includes NONE of the following: analysis of the tradeoffs involved in a major regulatory push toward fuel economy in the transportation sector, proposed cap-and-trade or other incentives for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, and a research program aimed at sequestration technologies. It is, in short, a wait-and-see document.

The scientific evidence on global warming is now beyond doubt. Readers of these pages during the past couple of years have seen one careful study after another documenting the role of anthropogenic sources of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in global warming; describing the impact of past and present climate change on marine and terrestrial ecosystems; and measuring rates of glacial melting in the Arctic, the Antarctic, and on the tops of low-latitude mountains.

Old hands have noted a strange resemblance between this effort and an earlier one. NAPAP, begun in the late 1980s, was a Reagan-era effort to study the acid rain problem (the acronym stands for National Acid Precipitation Assessment Project). It was cranked up with some fanfare and had the same leadership as the present study, in the person of James Mahoney (who is probably not to be blamed for either outcome). Like the present climate change plan, NAPAP essentially concluded that the problem needed more careful study. Ironically, it arrived too late, well after the administration of Bush I had decided to take acid rain more seriously. The result was that Congress, with considerable consultation and design coming from the White House, passed the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments containing tradable-permits provisions for limiting sulfur dioxide emissions.

It’s probably way too much to hope that a similar rescue might be at hand in this case, but there are encouraging signals out there. First, it now appears that industry takes the problem more seriously than the government—surely a record. British Petroleum and other energy companies now clearly expect to be doing business in a low-carbon economy, and they are spending serious money to prepare for it. So is the electric power industry, where some leaders have already made voluntary carbon offsets. Meanwhile, hybrid cars are proliferating and the insurance industry is worried about its viability. Second, Congress may be noting that the politically popular goal of energy independence is linked to that of reducing global warming, and their constituents don’t have to read Science to know that most glaciers are melting. It’s in their daily newspaper. Third, some states, weary of federal inaction in the matter, have been passing rules of their own: California recently passed a tough law to limit future fleet carbon emissions standards, despite the usual complaints from auto manufacturers that the sky would fall.

Especially relevant to the scientific community is that there will be an independent review of the administration’s plan by a National Research Council panel chaired by Tom Graedel of Yale. This is an opportunity for the National Academies to make a real difference. The Graedel panel should not be satisfied simply with a marginal critique of what’s there in the report. What isn’t there is important, so the panel needs to undertake an independent review of the situation, evaluate the seriousness of the challenge, and explain to the government what is missing from the report. The U.S. scientific community has come to expect a great deal from the Academies. In this case, the stakes are well beyond national interest, because the nonparticipation of the United States in the global effort on climate change is more than a national embarrassment. It’s dangerous.

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