

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Climate Healing

Making sense of the current proposed climate change solutions

No matter who's elected president, global warming will certainly be a key issue for the next administration. We've surely all seen the evidence that our culture has overshot our global ecosystem's carrying capacity, risking catastrophic climate destabilization. In response, many of us are making individual changes, which is essential but, sadly, insufficient.

Thus, it's vital that we as citizens also understand the community-level changes being discussed, then join with others to encourage truly wise plans. Certainly, the polluters will be angling for approaches that serve their interests, and the recent financial-system breakdown highlights the folly of letting powerful interests call the shots.

What is our climate change goal, exactly? According to Santa Rosa's Climate Protection Campaign (CPC), scientists say that we must reduce emissions a stunning 80 percent by 2050. Currently, each Californian's average annual greenhouse gas output is 14 tons. The 2050 target, given our population projections, is a breathtaking 1.5 tons per person.

How will we get there? That's the question CPC explores both in its work and at its Nov. 6 Climate All-Stars Conference. Ann Hancock, CPC's executive director and co-founder, says that the answer won't be just one solution but many combined. However, she counsels, "We really need to focus on the high-leverage ones. That's what we're trying to showcase at the conference: the real solutions for speed and scale."

Significant options now being explored include market-based approaches. Because current prices for carbon-polluting energy don't reflect their environmental harm, higher usage levels are encouraged. There-

fore, an increase in carbon prices should give consumers a more accurate price signal, making alternative energy and conservation more attractive, speeding up our vital transition and allowing the free market to determine the specifics.

How would increased carbon prices be implemented? There are two basic methods: a carbon tax and a cap-and-trade system. The benefit of a carbon tax, preferred by economists, is its simplicity. The tax is merely calculated per ton of carbon the first time that carbon-containing fuel (coal, oil or natural gas) comes out of the ground or off the ship. The tax can start low and increase over time.

The second method, cap-and-trade, is significantly more complex. It sets various emission caps then provides permits that are traded by corporations. Lowering the caps progressively over time reduces net pollution. Although this approach is currently seen as more politically viable because of its indirectness, critics call Europe's attempt at it a failure and are concerned that it creates a complex bureaucracy that is easily "gamed" by polluters to profit themselves, not the planet.

At this point, I often get lost among the various capping approaches, so I was happy to find Peter Barnes' booklet *Carbon Capping: A Citizen's Guide* (www.capanddividend.org), which is helpful for understanding the key design options and elements. He also offers his proposed variation, cap-and-dividend, which distributes cap-permit income directly to citizens, reducing the economic impact and rewarding those who conserve.

Building on this idea is NASA climate expert James Hansen's proposed tax-and-dividend system, which combines a carbon tax's simplicity with the

balancing effect of direct citizen dividends. To me, this starts sounding sensible. Plus, I feel empowered as I start catching on to the fundamental distinctions in how these proposals are structured.

I'm glad that CPC's conference will help us all explore systemic solutions like these. I'll also be interested to hear one of their keynote speakers, Adam Kahane, who wrote *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening and Creating New Realities*. Watching environmentalism go mainstream, I've felt that successful green implementation will require that we avoid dogmatism, and instead encourage exploratory conversations that bring forward our synergistic wisdom and empower democratic decisions about our future lives.

I hear that notion echoed when Kahane writes, "Simple problems, with low complexity, can be solved perfectly well—efficiently and effectively—using processes that are piecemeal, backward looking and authoritarian. By contrast, highly complex problems can only be solved using processes that are systemic, emergent and participatory."

Our current financial crisis reminds us that the economic rules of the game determine our cumulative behavior. The question then for all of us is: How can we modify our economic system so that it's truly healthy for ourselves and the planet?

The Climate Protection Campaign's Second Annual Climate All-Stars Conference is slated for Thursday, Nov. 6, at Saint Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco. 707.537.1679. www.climateallstars.org.

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