

GLOBAL WARMING: A COOLING ISSUE FOR AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

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The American farmer has played a major role in the most successful grass roots effort in American history: The Cleaning of Our Environment. When the Cuyahoga River caught fire in June of 1968 it let off the spark that lit the environmental revolution which has led the United States, in just thirty years, to possessing the cleanest environment on earth. While the job is not complete and caution toward protecting our environment must always be practiced, it is accurate to say that as we approach the end of a century we know these statements to be true.

1. The environment is cleaner than at any time in the past half century.
2. The environment is safer than at any time in recorded history.
3. Life expectancy has never been greater.
4. Cancer rates are falling not rising.
5. Predictions of global ecological disasters are untrue.
6. Most environmental problems have been or are being solved.
7. Prosperity is good for the environment.

The American farmer has contributed greatly to this progress through learning to handle the wonderful agricultural chemicals that have more than tripled crop production per acre in the past 30 years. In the early years of this chemical use farmers often over applied, misapplied, improperly stored and transported these chemicals to the detriment of our rural ground water.

Today non point source pollution from agricultural chemicals has all but been eliminated. The remaining problems of excess fertilizer running off into our rivers is being attacked with buffer strips of trees and shrubs along our waterways, lakes and reservoirs, and for a while by the benefits of the Freedom To Farm Act. Spills of manure and odor problems from highly concentrated animal feeding operations are being addressed by all levels of government such that the problems should be well in hand within a few years.

Our World is indeed getting cleaner, yet news about the environment is dominated by terrifying predictions of environmental destruction. When asked about the state of the Earth, more of us think about the threat of global warming than the reality of falling levels of air pollution.

Many environmental crises are simply manufactured out of flimsy evidence by individuals and groups who benefit from false alarms. Federal laws enacted to solve problems that do not exist are costing consumers tens of billions of dollars a year, diverting resources from more serious health problems, necessary social programs and job creating private investments.

Sometimes a problem identified by the environmental movement is real and merits attention. But care must be taken not to overreact with unwarranted actions, as we have done in the cases of radon, asbestos and ozone.

Famed astronomer Carl Sagan said shortly before his death that "Science is more than a body of knowledge. It is a way of thinking that looks skeptically. It teaches not blind obedience to those in authority, but vigorous debate"

Judging by the sometimes sharply conflicting views of experts, there is plenty for environmentalists to debate. Probably the most talked about environmental crisis in America today is global warming, the theory that man-made pollutants are trapping warm air in the Earth's atmosphere and causing a gradual rise in temperatures. TIME magazine editorialized that the possible consequences of global warming were so scary that it is only prudent for governments to slow the buildup of carbon dioxide through preventative measures. In 1997, in Kyoto, Japan the United States helped develop and then signed a treaty that would require us to limit Carbon Dioxide emissions to the extent that by the year 2012 we would emit 45% less carbon than we are presently projected to use by that year.

While some scientists believe global warming is an urgent threat, many more doubt its existence or believe its consequences will cause more benefit than harm to plant and animal life.

A Gallup poll conducted in 1992 of members of the American Geophysical Union and the American Meteorological Society, the two professional societies whose members are most likely to be involved in climate research, found that 18 percent thought some global warming had occurred, 33 percent said insufficient information existed to tell, and 49 percent believed no warming had taken place.

In 1999 17,000 scientists signed a petition claiming that no sufficient evidence for man induced global warming existed. It was sent on to the US Congress to no avail.

While this is not the same as stating that global warming will not occur in the future, the history of global climate change is an important issue in the global warming debate. There are three principle objections to the popular view of global warming.

First records of historical temperatures fail to support the predictions of future global warming. If a build-up of greenhouse gases leads directly to temperature increases, then temperatures over the past ten years should have increase 0.5 degrees centigrade. In fact temperatures measured by modern satellites at the top of our atmosphere where they should have been most severely effected have not risen at all. Data to the contrary, which indicates significant warming, has been gathered on the ground amidst communities with growing populations. This is known as the "urban heat island effect".

Thus the discrepancies between the global temperature record and global warming theory raise serious doubts about the reliability of prediction for future climate change.

A second major problem is that the computer models used to forecast global warming are very crude and unlikely to produce reliable data. Temperatures are affected by changes in the level of solar radiation reaching the Earth, sea-air interactions and stratospheric dust from volcanoes and asteroids. None of these processes is sufficiently well understood to be accurately modeled, weakening the predictive abilities of any computer model.

The major shortcomings of current climate models are sufficient grounds to hold off any decision about whether and how to respond to the threat of global warming. At some point in the future, these models may produce information of sufficient quality to be used as the basis for public policy, but clearly this is not now the case.

Finally almost all of the slight warming in this century has occurred at night and during the winter. Whether global warming would benefit or endanger animal and plant life depends largely on whether the warming takes place during winter or summer months, and during the day or at night. If warming occurs during summer days, it could lead to crop damage, disease, and possibly other negative effects on plants and animals. But if warming occurs at night and during the winter, plants and animals will benefit from the moderating temperatures and longer growing seasons.

The empirical record for the past fifty years is very clear on this point. The small amount of global warming that may have taken place has occurred during winter months and at night.

Despite the recent worst-case scenarios issued by the U.N., the scientific basis for the theory that man is causing global warming has unraveled. The emerging consensus within the scientific community supports the position that climate changes will be far smaller and less disruptive than those originally predicted. We should therefore be very skeptical of efforts to adopt policies that could impose substantial costs on consumers and businesses in the name of ending global warming.

If the United States government were to institute controls on carbon dioxide emissions, they could only do so by placing a 25% to 50% tax on fuel. Farming is a fuel intensive industry, not in farm machinery itself, which only uses 30 percent of the fuel we consume, but rather in the refining of the many chemicals we use.

These percent increases in fuel prices will end up as almost identical percent decreases in profits on all our output, such as corn, wheat, cotton and milk, with slightly lower affects on soy beans and higher impacts on hogs. Furthermore, by increasing the energy costs of farm production in America while leaving them unchanged in many developing countries such as China, India, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, which are emerging agricultural producers, the Kyoto Climate Control Treaty will cause U.S. food exports to decline and U.S. food imports to increase.

Of greater importance and fascination is the fact that virtually all evidence indicates that all plants prosper in the face of increased exposure to carbon dioxide. It is after all really just a gaseous fertilizer. Dutch greenhouses for example routinely and deliberately triple their CO2 levels and crops respond with 20 to 40 per cent yield increases.

A composite of 279 research studies, many by the USDA, predict that overall plant growth rates will ultimately double as carbon dioxide increases in the atmosphere. This is partly due to the fact that in the presence of increased CO2 virtually all plants require less water because transpiration is significantly decreased. This will be an unparalleled benefit for mankind living in desert climates.

The entire global warming controversy was hatched by eco-extremists certain that the worlds population was exploding. They are the same people who insisted the earth was running out of fossil fuel 30 years ago and then predicted global cooling 20 years ago. In short they want control of the world's energy in order to control the world's population. But in fact the world's population growth is already settling down as a result of improved standards of living and improved economies in the third world where births per women have declined from 6.5 in 1960 to 2.9 in 1998. World population is now expected to top out at 8.5 billion by about the year 2040, not the widely predicted eco-extremist projection of 15 billion.

It is time for everyone in rural America to stand up to the environmental distortions that surround us, especially in regard to global warming. Don't let the government destroy your livelihood based on junk science and eco-terrorism. Write your congressman today.

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Dr. Lehr holds a degree in Geological Engineering from Princeton University and a Ph.D. in Ground Water Hydrology from the University of Arizona. He has written a dozen books dealing with environmental subjects. In 1992 his book RATIONAL READINGS ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS, was published by Van Nostrand Reinhold. This year he completed a book commissioned by the McGraw-Hill Publishing company entitled HANDBOOK OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE, HEALTH AND TECHNOLOGY for the 21st Century.