

## Costs of severe storms require a fossil carbon tax

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The storm with golf ball-size hail that hit Rutland last month was another wakeup call. The hail dented a lot of cars, damaged roofs and broke windows and vinyl siding. This type of storm is more typical of Oklahoma than Vermont, because it takes strong instability to give the powerful updrafts that can recycle hailstones within the storm until they grow to this size. Fortunately cell phones gave urgent warnings, and most people took cover. But Rutland again had downtown flooding.

The Rutland Department of Public Works Commissioner Jeff Wennberg, who understands climate change risks, said, “In a six-year period we’ve had six storms that were deemed 10-year storms or worse, and Irene was a 100-year storm. Our storm water system just wasn’t built for this level of intense storms.”

Rebuilding our infrastructure and fixing flood damage from increasing severe weather is going to cost money, which small town budgets cannot afford. Will we simply have to suffer, or will our leaders really grapple with the issue?

The fundamentals are very clear, except to those lost in ideological dreamland. Vermont spends about \$1.5 billion each year burning fossil fuel — and dumping the waste CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere for free. The Earth’s water cycle processes amplify the warming produced by the carbon dioxide pollution, and severe weather is increasing. Vermont is responsible for a small share of a global climate problem that is getting worse.

The global problem requires federal action and an agreement between China and the United States. But Vermont has to pay the price of increasingly severe weather, as do all the other states. Obviously we must add a fossil carbon waste tax to the price of all the fossil fuel burnt in Vermont to raise funds to pay for rebuilding. We need new infrastructure that can handle the storm water. And we also must implement all the efficiency measures required to reduce the amount of fossil fuels used by our homes, businesses and transportation.

A 10 percent fossil carbon waste tax would raise about \$150 million a year in Vermont— a good start towards paying our escalating bills. Retrofitting homes typically reduces energy usage by 30 percent, so this tax would be easily offset by the savings on our heating bills. Much more efficient cars are available, so the improved mileage would likewise offset the carbon tax on gasoline.

Of course people don’t like taxes, because they do not trust politicians to spend wisely. They see national leaders who are less concerned about whether climate change is happening and more intent on continuing to deny the facts. Too many politicians are focused not on what the country and our children need, but on raising dollars for reelection.

We must have an honest discussion, not political hypocrisy. The climate is much more powerful than we are, and we have to deal with it every day.

A similar issue faces us in terms of protecting Lake Champlain. That lake absorbs the waste streams from our homes, towns and farms. When asked, 90 percent of Vermonters say they want clean water in our rivers and lakes — but only a minority are willing to pay for it.

People think they can dump their waste streams for free and then be rewarded with a free lunch! It is time for us to grow up and face reality.

This month the Environmental Protection Agency proposed standards to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> pollution from coal-burning power plants by 30 percent. The shift away from fossil fuel power plants may reduce profits in the traditional energy sector, but the Earth benefits enormously. Barclays recently downgraded the entire U.S. electricity sector, predicting an inevitable transition away from the utility monopoly on power generation as distributed energy generation becomes cheaper. We can be grateful that this transition has started in Vermont with both utility and legislative support