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Facing the truth about our policies

Last year the Governor's Climate Change Commission issued its recommendations and final report. You can see all the details at the Agency of Natural Resources Web site. Among them are lots of great ideas for reducing Vermont's "carbon foot-print": the greenhouse gas emissions that we produce when we burn fossil fuels. The ANR Web site also describes what the state government is doing and gives advice on what citizens can do.

The bottom line is that Vermont could reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent in 20 years and save a great deal of money. That estimate is based on the 2007 price of oil. With the 50 percent increase in the price of oil since then, you would think the Legislature would be rushing to implement proposals, but progress is very slow. Two bills were passed this year.

One bill, S.209, accomplishes several useful things. It expands net metering for electricity and encourages in-state renewable electric energy generation from wind, solar, biomass and hydropower. This approach got a major boost recently when Green Mountain Power introduced a plan to pay homes and businesses a 50 percent bonus rate for solar electricity. Solar power, which peaks in the daytime, reduces the need to buy expensive peak power on the spot market. Time is running out to build new renewable energy generation in Vermont, as our long-term contracts for relatively cheap electricity start to phase out in 2012.

This same bill sets higher efficiency standards for commercial and residential buildings. It also directs Efficiency Vermont and the Department of Public Service to establish new programs to help retrofit homes and businesses for greater energy efficiency to save fossil fuels. With heating oil above \$4 a gallon, this is a matter of urgency. A useful goal would be to retrofit all of Vermont's older houses in 10 years or less. It would take a large investment, but the savings in dollars would be even larger, not to mention the small step we'd be taking towards reducing our impact on the Earth's climate.

Another bill, S.350, recognizes the need to measure greenhouse gases, and it sets up a Vermont Climate Change Oversight Committee to report back to the Legislature next winter. This same bill sets worthy "goals" to improve public transportation options in the state but avoids tackling the obvious. Most of our travel in Vermont is in heavy, inefficient vehicles with a single occupant. With gas prices at \$4 a gallon, Vermont's transportation system is facing a crisis.

People who can afford it are buying more fuel-efficient cars. But many Vermonters will be stuck driving old vehicles getting 20 miles per gallon or less for another 5 to 10 years. It's important to remember how we got into this mess. For 20 years, since the mid-1980s, the federal government has bowed to pressure (that is financial contributions) from the oil and auto industries and refused to pass higher mileage standards for cars and trucks. It has been a profitable business plan for the oil industry, but at immeasurable cost to the earth.

Change is coming, whether we like it or not. How do we choose a new path when there is much uncertainty? Uncertainty is inevitable in dealing with complex systems like the earth's climate and biosphere, as well as our own human political, social and economic systems. Our old familiar ideas and ideologies don't help much. We must look first at our assumptions. The days of an exponentially growing consumer economy based on cheap fossil fuel and raw materials are over. The Bush administration still has its head deep in the sand, believing that denial will carry it safely into retirement. I think sadly of the French King Louis XV, who said near his end "Après moi le deluge."

But here in Vermont we can choose differently. This will take courage and leadership, and an open honest discussion of choices and trade-offs. We must try a wide range of local options that keep investment dollars in our communities. The local food movement is growing rapidly, and now we need to support a similar, diverse local energy movement. Both will enrich our communities and give Vermont long-term security.

Where will we get the cash to invest in the new technologies and infrastructure that will ultimately save us so much money? We need private and public investment. Individual and corporate investors should be encouraged to shift resources to local tangible investments. As a state, we should tax carbon fuels to fund alternatives.

Yet last year a 1-cent "efficiency charge" on heating oil to fund efficiency improvements in homes was considered politically unacceptable. This is politics at its silliest. Would we rather let the poor in Vermont freeze in winter than

retrofit their homes with insulation and save them enough to get by? Have our politicians forgotten the market? If we reduce demand for heating oil in the Northeast, might not the price (now near \$4.50 a gallon) drop by that 1-cent tax? We had the sense to do this for electrical efficiency eight years ago, and the rewards have been large.

Why is it so hard for our leaders to face the truth? We all know why! We the people are also afraid to face the truth, and politicians need our votes! Elections are coming. Start with honest discussions among your friends and in your communities. Can you come up with local solutions for some of our energy and environment issues that you and your community can implement?

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