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The Weekly Planet: The Copenhagen challenge

By ALAN BETTS

With so much rain this summer, evaporation has continued into the fall — and the clear skies of autumn have been rare. October was rather wet and chilly. November was a little clearer, with a few warmer days. But as the sun drops lower in the sky and we approach the winter solstice, the days get shorter and the nights longer. At our latitude, the earth cools more to space at night than it is warmed by the sun during daytime. Clearer skies just slow this drop of temperature, until the first heavy blanket of snow plunges us into winter by reflecting a lot of the sun's warmth.

As we move toward winter, it's time for some reflection by the fire. There is much we need to rethink before the coming year. The United Nations Climate Change Conference begins tomorrow in Copenhagen. It may be the most important global meeting this century — but will an agreement be reached in two weeks on a binding plan to move our global economies away from fossil fuels? Here in the United States, Congress has failed to pass climate change legislation this year. We are now a decade behind other countries in this respect.

Despite all the talk of change, Congress has moved at a glacial pace this year. Our collective worldview has barely changed, while events continue to rush onward around us. We have spent a trillion dollars to rescue the shadow economy of investment banking and insurance derivatives (hiding behind the myths of trickle-down economics and too-big-to-fail), while unemployment steadily grows. Why is it so hard to face uncomfortable truths and start planning for a sustainable and resilient society, rather than lurch from crisis to crisis?

Here in Vermont the situation is brighter. In May, our Legislature passed the far-reaching "Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Act" implementing feed-in tariffs for solar, wind and biogas projects. The Public Service Board reviewed and ratified electric rate tariffs for these renewable power sources, and the program was fully subscribed the first day in October that it was open for bid. In fact, for photovoltaic power 170 MW of projects were proposed, but only 14 MW could be accepted, because the entire program has a 50 MW cap spread across all types of renewable power. This is an excellent beginning that will provide local power and productive employment. With a similar effort every year for the next decade, Vermont could become largely self-sufficient with renewable power, and our aging nuclear power plant could be phased out.

It is here in our local communities that we need to look for inspiration this winter. Locally a community planning group is working to reduce the energy needs of 10 percent of the homes in Rutland County by 10 percent in the coming year.

We have yet to build a wind farm on any of the ridges west of Rutland — we will need that electricity on windy nights in winter in the coming decades to recharge our hybrid-electric vehicles and for ground heat pumps (that extract heat from the ground). We will have to look beyond our fears and learn to admire the stark beauty of the turbines as they turn almost silently in the wind to generate renewable power for our homes and businesses. We should build them as community projects, so that our towns and schools benefit financially — as world leaders like Denmark have done for decades.

We need to return to community solutions that root employment in our local economy and environment, where we have some understanding and control and some financial benefit. We have trumpeted individualism and consumerism — and bred alienation. It is living communities that we need and want, where we can find our shared common purpose around a fire in the depths of the Vermont winter.

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UN Climate Change Conference

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