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Strong Regulations Are Good For Climate And Economy

By Bob Doppelt

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The clock is ticking. A WWII-like mass mobilization is required to slash greenhouse gas emissions by at least 45 percent in less than 12 years to prevent civilization-altering climate disruption.

In addition to nationalizing the fossil fuel corporations and Wall Street firms that block change, another centerpiece of the emergency mobilization must be tough new regulations. Unregulated markets cannot solve the problem. They drive the fossil fuel-powered, “take it-make it-waste it” economic system that propels the climate crisis.

Economists call carbon emissions and activities that degrade nature’s capacity to sequester carbon “negative externalities.” They are harmful impacts with great financial costs that other people and future generations must pay. We need regulations to force the organizations or sectors generating these externalities to internalize them.

But the climate crisis cannot be reduced merely to financial costs. Carbon emissions and degradation of ecosystems are generating irreversible planetary impacts that for centuries will cause massive human suffering. Society has a right and responsibility to declare that a healthy climate is a non-negotiable human right, and to aggressively regulate activities that undermine that right.

Two types of regulations exist: economic, which address prices and market entry, and social, which focus on how organizations operate and affect society.

The Clean Energy Jobs bill the Oregon legislature will consider next year combines both approaches. It proposes to cut emissions by putting a price on every ton of carbon generated by large polluters, and by establishing a firm, enforceable cap, or limit, on how much

they can emit annually. This mix is intended to motivate big polluters to innovative and slash emissions. Proponents say the resulting funds will be invested in emission-reducing and job-creating technologies and practices statewide.

Change must begin somewhere. This bill should become law.

The Clean Energy Jobs bill will not, however, address two of Oregon's largest sources emissions: industrial forestry, and the consumption of products and services manufactured elsewhere that are transported and used here. Nor will it address the damage that industrial agriculture, forestry and urbanization do to vegetation and soils that sequester carbon. Strong social regulations, including outright bans on practices such as clear-cutting and clearing forests for urban development — as an expansion of the Eugene-Springfield Urban Growth Boundary might cause — are needed to prevent further damage.

All systems of law rely on prohibitions. Society prohibits stealing, damaging property and killing others. Bans are used when the need is clear, compelling and urgent. The climate emergency unmistakably meets these criteria.

Corporate executives and others enamored with free-market ideology will oppose new regulations. History shows, however, that opponents typically vastly overstate the costs of meeting regulations. They also fail to acknowledge that regulations frequently stimulate innovations.

Strong new climate regulations could also help spur a much needed economic transformation that generates thousands of family wage jobs for rural and urban Oregonians.

We are in the midst of an unprecedented societal emergency. This late in the game, aggressive regulations are the only way to prevent climate catastrophe.

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