

BOB DOPPELT: Debt is deadly, and a lot of it is environmental

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Opinion: Editorials & Letters: Story

“In Europe, anger gets personal in hard times,” read the headline of an English language newspaper the day I left the Copenhagen climate congress.

The story described how Europeans, outraged over the loss of their jobs and savings due to the economic meltdown, were vandalizing the homes of financial industry executives and trapping corporate chief executives in their offices.

But the resentment over the economic collapse is certain to pale in comparison to the recrimination expressed worldwide if the United States fails to rapidly slash its carbon emissions.

The trigger will be economic and social dislocation induced by climate change. Such dislocation will lead people to realize that the financial debt is not the most important, or largest, debt our economy has generated.

Not by a long ways.

The biggest debt hanging over us is our ecological debt. Through our beliefs, practices and policies, we have built up huge debts on the land, in the oceans and in the sky that will undermine all future economic activity.

The climate is the largest portion of our ecological debt. Humanity is putting carbon into the atmosphere much faster than it can be removed. We must take a lion’s share of the responsibility for this. With less than 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States has produced about a quarter of the carbon emissions that have destabilized the global climate.

Degraded natural systems are another key element of our ecological debt. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a five-year international scientific survey, found that two-thirds of the globe’s ecological services, such as the clean air and water provided by nature, are degraded or are used unsustainably.

Degraded natural systems magnify the climate debt. About 20 percent of today's carbon emissions result from land use changes such as the conversion of forests to agriculture.

The chief provocateur of climate change, carbon dioxide, is especially important because it is a direct byproduct of how our economy is structured.

Today, CO₂ and economic growth are joined at the hip. More growth means more CO₂, which means more climate disruption, which means more social and political dislocation. This straightforward equation has profound implications.

The first is that if we try to jump-start our economy using the same approach to economic development that got us into this mess in the first place, we will sink deeper into ecological debt.

Much of the federal stimulus money, for example, is aimed at "shovel ready" road and infrastructure projects, which often require huge amounts of cement. The production of Portland cement is extremely CO₂-intensive, accounting for about 5 percent of total human-generated carbon emissions and a substantial chunk of Oregon's. About a ton of CO₂ is generated for every ton of Portland cement produced.

Although a well-maintained infrastructure is important, we must not dig our way out of this generation's biggest economic crisis by piling up an even larger ecological debt for future generations.

That leads to the second implication, which is about the type of economic recovery we should be aiming for. Our industrial system has become a victim of its own success.

Long before the recent crash, the U.S. economy had the capacity to produce way more goods than buyers had the ability to absorb. Overcapacity in the U.S. automobile industry, for example, is reported to have reached 25 percent, and similar oversupply problems exist in steel, textiles, fisheries and many other sectors.

The basic needs for food and shelter of most Americans with decent financial resources also have been met.

Rather than being "pulled" by genuine demand for goods that meet real human needs, our system has been transformed into a "push" economy that manufactures needs through sophisticated marketing techniques and then produces stuff to satisfy those artificial "necessities."

Much of our carbon emissions today are the result of making, transporting, using and disposing of nonessential goods. This process is destabilizing the planet.

Ironically, there is a huge untapped demand for goods that can meet a bona fide need for which the market is not yet saturated. That is the necessity for processes, products and services that can reduce our ecological debt.

Let's use federal stimulus funds to redirect our surplus manufacturing capacity to meeting the urgent real need for low or carbon-free goods and services, and those that restore natural systems.

How about transforming recreational vehicle manufacturers into alternative fuel vehicle companies? Can excess capacity in the forest products industry be transformed into jobs in carbon sequestration and forest restoration?

Using our existing industrial capacity to reduce our ecological debt can save or create millions of jobs. The United States also will become the envy of the world rather than a target of anger.

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