

People ready to act on climate change

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For The Register-Guard

Published: June 30, 2008 12:00AM

A flurry of e-mails flashed across my computer last week from people distressed about the lack of progress on global warming. Call me an optimist, but I don't see things this way. I think we are on the verge of taking big steps toward tackling the problem.

Experts in behavioral change know that people progress through fairly predictable stages when making a major shift. They normally start in a stage of disinterest. They don't know a problem exists, don't think it's serious, or have little interest in changing.

A 2007 ABC/Washington Post/Stanford University poll found that only about 17 percent of the U.S. population is "not concerned" or "not too concerned" about global warming. Few people are still in a state of disinterest on global warming.

If a major shock occurs or new information increases their awareness of a problem, people move beyond disinterest and begin to deliberate over whether to change their behavior. According to a 2007 Yale University/Gallup/ClearVision Institute poll, nearly half of Americans believe global warming is either already having dangerous effects or will in the next 10 years — an increase of 20 percentage points since 2004.

If they decide that the benefits of new behaviors far outweigh the downsides, people will stop deliberating and act. A number of "early adopters," for example, are already reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. More than 100 commercial customers purchase green power from the Eugene Water & Electric Board, and more than 230 residential customers purchase renewable energy from the Springfield Utility Board.

Further, the Yale poll found that 62 percent of Americans believe that "global warming is an urgent threat requiring immediate and drastic action." Although a recent Gallup poll found that issues such as the economy and rising oil prices still rank as higher priorities than global warming, it appears that a majority of the population is ready to act by altering their behavior or supporting legislation.

Public policies also evolve through a normal cycle. The process starts when new issues are introduced to the political stage by scientific or government institutions, interest groups or specific events.

When interest in the issue reaches a high enough level, different legislative proposals are formulated.

If sufficient pressure exists, eventually a legislative body or executive such as a governor or president makes a choice about the specific policy to adopt, and implementation begins.

In a relatively short period the Lieberman-Warner climate bill moved from the

conceptual stage to falling just six votes shy of the 60 needed to get to the Senate floor. Although they take different approaches, Republican presidential nominee John McCain and Democratic nominee Barack Obama are both on record supporting cap-and-trade as a way to reduce emissions.

At the state level, Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski has joined the governors of six other Western states and two Canadian provinces in developing a cap-and-trade emission reduction plan.

These and many other events suggest that the policy formation stage is about over, and the policy adoption phase is set to begin.

I'm optimistic about our ability to confront global warming for another reason as well. Each week I see credible new information confirming that we have the know-how today to cut emissions while maintaining social and economic well-being.

In May, for example, the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy reported that a combination of behavioral changes, policies and investments in many underutilized energy efficiency technologies can cost-effectively reduce U.S. energy consumption — and a similar amount of greenhouse gasses — by 25 percent to 30 percent by 2030.

Also in May, the U.S. Department of Energy reported that windmills in the Great Plains and along the West and East coasts could supply 20 percent of U.S. electricity by the year 2030 and significantly cut emissions. Although wind now constitutes just 1 percent of the nation's electricity, the DOE said within a few short years it could supply roughly the same percentage of the nation's power as nuclear plants provide today.

The American Solar Energy Association last year went even further. It reported that with the right set of incentives the combination of solar, biomass, wind and other sources of renewable energy could provide approximately 40 percent of projected U.S. electrical energy needs by 2030.

If I'm adding right, this means behavioral changes, greater use of energy efficient technologies, and a major scaling up of renewables could cut U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by somewhere around 65 percent to 70 percent.

There is no need for despair. Solutions are available. We are moving toward action. With clarity of purpose and diligence, we can solve the climate crisis.

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