

Ferguson: Energy Matters

March 9, 2007

I Go Pogo

My favorite cartoon character of all time is Pogo, the lovable and wise possum in the Okefenokee Swamp created by Walt Kelly many years ago. For those of you too young to remember, Pogo even ran for president of the United States in the 1950s with the catchy slogan "I Go Pogo."

Pogo's most memorable line was "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Now that the reality of global warming is sinking into the public consciousness, Pogo's wisdom is more appropriate than ever. It's easy to blame evil oil companies for our planet's plight. Or evil automobile manufacturers, utilities, coal companies, politicians, Chinese, or someone - anyone but us. But when you get right down to it, Pogo was right: we humans are our own worst enemy.

To be sure, putting the petroleum industry in charge of the White House ensured that the U.S. government would delay collective efforts to fight global warming. Duh! What did we expect? But even politicians that understand the problem have a difficult time figuring out what to do about it.

The *really* inconvenient truth is that we are all fatally attracted to cheap energy from fossil fuels and the status, power, mobility, and ease that cheap energy provides. We are loath to give it up, and politicians know it.

Little children quickly learn that the word "need" is much stronger than the word "want," as in "I *need* a glass of milk." As adults, we think we *need* our cars and pickup trucks, our clothes driers and TV sets, and all the other trappings of modern life. Of course, humans lived for thousands of years without these things, but now we're convinced that we cannot live without them.

There are still billions of people on earth without access to cheap energy, and to no one's surprise, they want it, too. The phenomenal growth of energy consumption in China and India vividly demonstrates that the appeal of cheap energy is universal. Pogo was right, as usual.

If we're not going to fry the planet by burning up all the coal, oil, and gas and spewing carbon dioxide into the air, what will we do instead? One option is to wait until a miraculous new clean energy source is discovered - nuclear fusion, perhaps - that is as cheap as fossil fuels or almost so. Like winning millions of dollars in the lottery, this could happen, but the odds are similarly remote.

Another possibility is that Rocky Mountain Institute founder Amory Lovins's utopia will come to pass, in which we satisfy all our wants but happily use a tiny fraction of the energy we use now. My guess is that reality will not be so comfortable, except for the rich.

Using energy more efficiently is a no-brainer that saves money and the planet, too. But in my opinion, facing up to global warming will require sacrificing some of our vaunted "lifestyle" - things that we want but don't need. That's the *really, really,*

inconvenient truth about global warming. Until we're ready to make sacrifices for the good of the planet, we'll remain the enemy that Pogo identified.

—*Dr. Rich Ferguson, Research Director, CEERT, rich@ceert.org.*