

Ferguson: Energy Matters

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Saying No to Coal

California has issued a highly publicized challenge to limit global warming. In the state's electricity sector, that means reducing the carbon dioxide released when coal and natural gas is burned to generate power - by a whopping 26 percent from 2005 levels.

In 2005, coal-fired power provided 22 percent of the state's electricity supply, while natural gas provided 37 percent. But since coal is much more polluting than gas, emissions from coal and gas were about the same. If California is going to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels to limit climate change, the first resource to give up is obviously coal.

Very little coal is burned inside California's borders. Nearly all of the coal-fired power we use is generated in neighboring states and imported here. All California needs to do to reduce greenhouse gas emissions substantially is to stop buying coal-fired power.

But is that legal? The coal industry says no, and has promised to sue the state for trying.

There is a more perplexing aspect to the coal problem, however. If California stops sending its ratepayer dollars to the coal guys, it is unlikely that they will stop burning coal. They'll simply sell the electricity to someone else and keep the plants operating.

So what will California have accomplished? The amount of carbon dioxide going into the air and warming the planet will not have changed. Perhaps the state is merely laundering its electricity dollars?

The answer is a resounding no. A statement by the people of California that henceforth they will refuse to provide financial support for burning coal would be the strongest possible statement that the state could make on global warming.

Worldwide, coal creates almost as much carbon dioxide as burning oil, even though the latter gets much more media attention. Furthermore, global coal resources are much more extensive than the oil remaining. Coal is the 800-pound gorilla of global warming.

It may be an inconvenient truth, but we simply cannot keep dumping carbon dioxide from coal into the air. If we humans are going to limit global warming, everyone is going to have to stop providing financial support for the conventional burning of coal.

California can say no to coal rather easily - less than one-quarter of its electricity comes from coal. Nationally, the fraction is over 50 percent. In many other countries the fraction is higher yet. California could easily replace all the electricity it gets from coal with natural gas or, better yet, energy from nonfossil resources. If California cannot say no to conventional coal, there is no hope of limiting global warming.

The coal industry's legal attempt to prohibit California from choosing cleaner sources

of electricity is misguided. The industry should instead concentrate on commercializing technology that utilizes the energy that coal can provide but permanently "sequesters" the resulting carbon dioxide and prevents it from warming the globe.

NASA plans to open a manned base on the moon by the year 2020. At a fraction of the cost of this dubious adventure, we earthlings can surely figure out how to keep the lights on without turning coal into greenhouse gas.

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