

## An Unfortunate U-Turn on Carbon

**E**very once in a while, one misfortune begets another. That happened a couple of weeks ago, when President Bush decided that his campaign commitment to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants was, in the words of his White House spokesman, a “mistake.” The rationale given for this about-face is contained in the president’s letter to four Republican senators. That letter says, in pertinent part, “At a time when California has already experienced energy shortages, and other Western states are worried about price and availability of energy this summer, we must be very careful not to take actions that could harm consumers.”

We Californians are experiencing some chagrin over this. Bad enough that we had our notorious deregulation fiasco, abetted by industry advocates and accomplished in Governor Pete Wilson’s term; now, just when our electric bills have tripled, we get used as an excuse for another unfortunate move! It’s almost enough to make us pretend we’re from somewhere else. But if you think we’re embarrassed, consider poor Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christine Whitman and Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill. Administrator Whitman, who’s had some New Jersey experience with air quality issues, knew better. So did Secretary O’Neill, who has extensive personal knowledge about climate science. They both made public commitments based on the president’s campaign position and are now left to wonder where the rug went.

This reversal coincides with more than just the California energy crunch. Just a few weeks earlier, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its most recent assessment. Not only did the climate science panel reinforce the conclusions about global warming reached in earlier assessments, it raised the upper bound of the estimates for average global temperature rise during this century. And it has also strengthened the theory that the increase experienced during the past hundred years is partially due to emissions from fossil fuel combustion. By now the scientific consensus on global warming is so strong that it leaves little room for the defensive assertions that keep emerging from the cleverly labeled industrial consortium called the Global Climate Coalition and from a shrinking coterie of scientific skeptics. To be sure, the president didn’t say he doubted that consensus. He just acted as though he did.

During the past year in these pages, we have published over 30 peer-reviewed reports and articles documenting findings that relate to global climate change. Some of these extended the kinds of modeling studies cited in the IPCC report. Others documented the intensification of the El Niño events that has accompanied the warming we have already experienced. Still others measured the retreat of glaciers, the thinning of polar ice caps, the extraordinary growth in the heat content of the world’s oceans, and other indicators. All of them, in one way or another, support the concerns that the president now says he is not prepared to address.

And that’s just from one journal. Consensus as strong as the one that has developed around this topic is rare in science. Of course there is room for arguments about the economics. How much should we reduce emissions? How fast? And at what cost? These questions are open to debate. But there is little room for doubt about the seriousness of the problem the world faces, and other nations, including most of our trading partners in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, understand that. This decision will surely discourage international efforts to move toward an emissions control regime.

We were all led to believe that the president, to the surprise of many, was prepared to take the constructive path he outlined in the campaign—the path his appointees had announced they would follow. News reports indicate that industry representatives talked him out of that position. Well, it must have been a one-sided argument. In this space a week ago, I argued that the absence of leadership in the Office of Science and Technology Policy had permitted the development of an unbalanced budget portfolio in the sciences. Here is another cost: There was no authoritative science voice around to say, in response to those who argue that global warming isn’t to be taken seriously, “Mr. President, on this one the science is clear.”

**Donald Kennedy**

