

U.S. Carbon Dioxide Emissions Shrinking

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From a column by Dr. Patrick J. Michaels

When it comes to the possibility of human-caused global warming, carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) receive the most attention and are the target of legislation at the federal and state level as well as regulation from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Most of these legislative and regulatory proposals have as their goal a 20% reduction of CO₂ emissions by the year 2020, and then further 20% reductions in each decade up to 2050. The ultimate goal is to force the levels of CO₂ emitted in the U.S. down about 80% below what we currently emit—a value so low as to be equivalent, on a per person basis, to the amount that was emitted in the mid-1860s. While such a scenario is hard to for most of us to imagine, legislation passed by the House of Representatives in 2009 mandated an even greater reduction of 83%; at the time the Senate chose not to vote on the matter.

Nonetheless, such proposals are still quite alive and are probably being debated at the EPA as you read this. But would such reductions of U.S. emissions have any detectable effect on the world's climate?

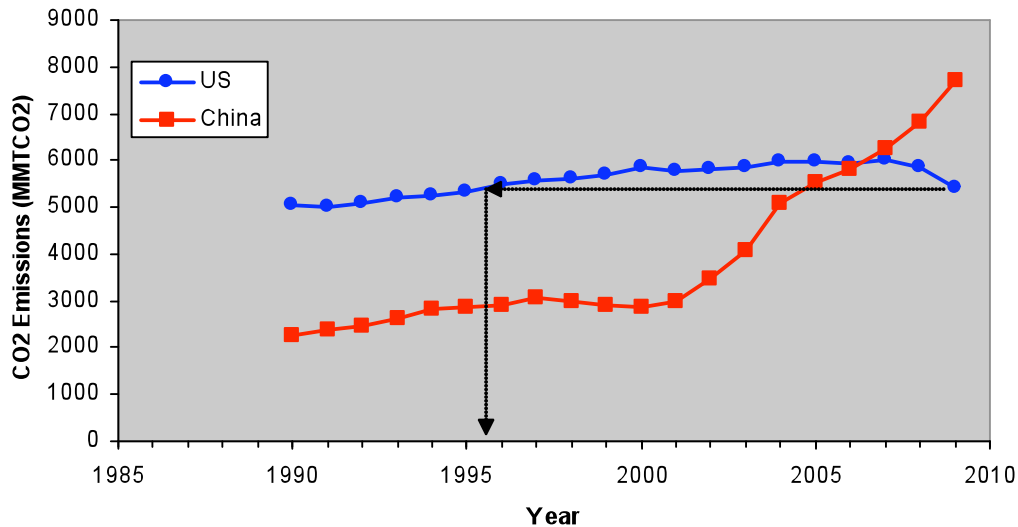
The answer is no, not as long as China and other rapidly developing nations such as India continue to expand their emissions like gangbusters. This is obvious from the latest data on national and international carbon dioxide emissions trends (through 2009) that was just released by the U.S Energy Information Administration (EIA).

CO₂ emissions in the U.S. fell by a record 7.1% from 2008 to 2009, dropping to their lowest levels in 15 years. In addition there is now an overall slight downward trend since 1999.

The EIA attributes the 2009 decline primarily to three factors—an economy in recession, a particularly hard-hit energy-intensive industries sector, and a large drop in the price of natural gas that caused fuel switching away from coal to natural gas in the electric power sector. Note that two of the three factors are related to the overall health of our economy, while the other is a result of the normal search for more efficient energy.

So how do U.S. emissions now stack up against those from other nations? The answer is that we are increasingly becoming a bit player in the global carbon dioxide sweepstakes.

The chart below shows the levels of carbon dioxide emissions in the U.S. and China from 1990-2009.



Carbon dioxide emissions from the United States and China, 1990-2009 (data source, EIA). Figures are in Million Metric Tons (MMT).

Several things are obvious:

- U.S. emissions in 2009 were the lowest since 1995.
- The trend in U.S. emissions has been downward since 1999.
- China's emissions have increased by about 175% since 1999.
- In 2009, China's annual emissions were 42% greater than ours.

The trend in China's emissions since 1999 is an increase of 508 million metric tons [mmtCO₂] per year—an amount equal to about 1/10th of U.S. total annual emissions.

Think about this for a minute. As noted above, the typical CO₂ emissions reduction rate targeted by proposed Congressional legislation or EPA regulation is about 20% per decade—equivalent to a decline that averages about 120 mmtCO₂ per year. China currently is increasing its total emissions by an average of 508 mmtCO₂ per year!

In other words, China is adding new CO₂ emissions at a rate that is four times faster than the proposed reductions of ours. What would take us a year to achieve, China undoes in three months, then goes on to add three times that amount during the rest of that year.

This dismal math illuminates the inherent silliness in using “global warming” as a reason for pushing for big reductions in U.S. carbon dioxide emissions. As long as China chugs along as it has for years, nothing our country does really matters.

Politicians, who have as their first responsibility improving the situation for Americans here and now, ought to be seeking ways to get the U.S. CO₂ emissions heading upwards again rather than worrying about ways to try to reduce them, because two of the three reasons given by the EIA for the recent drop in U.S. CO₂ emissions have to do with hard economic times. Turn around the economy and you will turn around emissions.

What's in store for the immediate future? Probably more of the same—that is, a relatively low level of carbon dioxide emission from the U.S.—as the circumstances that led to the low value in 2009 have not really changed all that much. Hopefully, for all our sakes, the trend in U.S. CO2 emissions won't stay negative for too much longer—at least not for the current reasons.

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