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Web Posted: 11/28/2008 12:00 CST

Hold off on that obituary for fossil fuels

By **Kathleen Hartnett White** - Express-News

A refrain persists within the media, industry and Congress that onerous federal mandates to regulate carbon dioxide are inevitable. I don't think so.

In less than a year, many unanticipated developments have complicated the political dynamics of “ending the era of fossil fuels” through the enactment of carbon reduction mandates:

- When the price of oil topped \$4 a gallon and food inflation reached almost 8 percent, most voters got it: price and security first. At least a dozen recent polls show that three-fourths of likely voters put far more importance on the U.S. oil supply than global warming.

This prevalent public opinion dissolved Congress' long and intransigent opposition to increased domestic oil production. In late September, the 30-year bans on offshore oil production expired.

- Energy independence has become a battle cry across the political spectrum. The painfully high price of oil increased the public's recognition that there are no near-term, realistic alternatives to the dominance of fossil fuels in the U.S. energy supply. American dependence on unreliable, if not inimical, sources of foreign oil worries Main Street far more than it used to.

- The European Union's Emission Trading System, once the model for a U.S. program, continues to fail. Europe's program is not reducing carbon dioxide and has led to higher energy costs.

The United States has reduced more carbon emissions by market efficiencies and without any complicated cap-and-trade programs. Growing numbers of EU member countries, including Italy, now want to delay (read “scratch”) the ETS because of economic woes approaching crisis proportions.

- By the time the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act made it to the Senate floor last summer, the veil on its staggering cost had been lifted. The world's most ambitious, enforceable carbon regime to date would impose exorbitant costs and require unprecedented expansion of federal control. But it would yield no measurable effect on global climate unless China and India undertook similarly draconian programs.

- Far more substantial climate science is emerging and is a game-changer for the reigning science from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Observational evidence from NASA satellites indicates little to no heat-forcing effect from manmade carbon dioxide. This NASA information is empirical science, far superior to the uncertain IPCC computer models.

- And the clincher: the specter of global recession. Worldwide financial turmoil presents the most hard-hitting obstacle to mandatory CO2 reduction. While figures may differ, no one doubts that CO2 reduction mandates would lead to far higher prices for fuel, power, food and other basic consumer goods.

Until the United States and global economies stabilize, even the least prudent among us should delay CO2 regulations that would overturn our energy economy.


Amid the current economic maelstrom, some congressional leaders perversely cling to carbon regulation as a new federal revenue source to compensate for a reduced tax base. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the federal government's auction of carbon allocations could generate trillions of dollars in revenue.

Inconvenient facts, however, may have changed the political climate necessary for major CO2 reduction programs absent available control technology. In the last year, many policymakers and voters have learned some hard facts about energy and the economy. If an ounce of reason might prevail, climate change policymakers would acknowledge that mandates are premature and impractical.

Immediate steps should be toward extending the new empirical climate science and market-based development of energy efficient technologies. Natural variability — or change, simply speaking — is the hallmark of climate and politics: not easy to predict, and never inevitable.

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