

Message from Sophie Prize Winner

I am grateful to Jostein Gaarder and the Sophie Foundation for the opportunity to discuss the state of Earth's climate, the implications for people and nature, and action that is needed.

Our planet today is close to climate tipping points. Ice is melting in the Arctic, on Greenland and Antarctica, and on mountain glaciers worldwide. Many species are stressed by environmental destruction and climate change. Continuing fossil fuel emissions, if unabated, will cause sea level rise and species extinction accelerating out of humanity's control. Increasing atmospheric water vapor is already magnifying climate extremes, increasing overall precipitation, causing greater floods and stronger storms.

Stabilizing climate requires restoring our planet's energy balance. The physics is straightforward. The effect of increasing carbon dioxide on Earth's energy imbalance is confirmed by precise measurements of ocean heat gain. The principal implication is defined by the geophysics, by the size of fossil fuel reservoirs. Simply put, there is a limit on how much carbon dioxide we can pour into the atmosphere. We cannot burn all fossil fuels. Specifically, we must (1) phase out coal use rapidly, (2) leave tar sands in the ground, and (3) not go after the last drops of oil.

Actions needed so that the world can move on to the clean energies of the future are possible and practical. The actions would restore clean air and water globally, assuring intergenerational equity by preserving creation – the natural world -- thus also helping achieve north-south justice. But the needed actions will happen only if the public becomes forcefully involved.

Citizens can help by blocking coal plants, tar sands, and mining the last drops of fossil fuels from public and pristine lands and the deep ocean. However, fossil fuel addiction can be solved only when we recognize an economic law as certain as the law of gravity: as long as fossil fuels are the cheapest energy they will be used.

Solution therefore requires a rising fee on oil, gas and coal – a carbon fee collected from fossil fuel companies at the domestic mine or port of entry. All funds collected should be distributed to the public on a per capita basis to allow lifestyle adjustments and spur clean energy innovations. As the fee rises, fossil fuels will be phased out, replaced by carbon-free energy and efficiency.

Governments today, instead, talk of "cap-and-trade-with-offsets", a system rigged by big banks and fossil fuel interests. Cap-and-trade invites corruption. Worse, it is ineffectual, assuring continued fossil fuel addiction to the last drop and environmental catastrophe.

We need a simple honest flat rising carbon fee across the board. It should be revenue neutral – all funds distributed to the public – "100 percent or fight". It is the only realistic path to global action. China and India will not accept caps, but they need a carbon fee to spur clean energy and avoid fossil fuel addiction.

But our governments have no intention of solving the fossil fuel and climate problem, as is easy to prove: the United States, Canadian and Norwegian governments are going right ahead developing the tar sands, which, if it is not halted, will make it impossible to stabilize climate.

Our governments knowingly abdicate responsibility for young people and future generations. I have been disappointed in interactions with more than half a dozen nations. In the end, they offer only soothing words, "goals" for emission reductions at far off dates, while their actual deeds prevent stabilization of climate.

The Sophie Prize provides a new opportunity to draw attention to the actions that are needed to stabilize climate. Norway may be the best place, with its history of environmentalism. I can imagine Norway standing tall among nations, taking real action to address climate change, drawing attention to the hypocrisy in the words and pseudo-actions of other nations.

So I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister suggesting that the government, as the majority owner of Statoil, should intervene in planned tar sands development. I appreciate the polite response, by letter, from the Deputy Minister of Petroleum and Energy. The government position is that the tar sands investment is "a commercial decision", that the government should not interfere, and that a "vast majority in the Norwegian parliament" agree that this constitutes "good corporate governance". The Deputy Minister concluded his letter "I can however assure you that we will continue our offensive stance on climate change issues both at home and abroad".

A Norwegian grandfather, upon reading the Deputy Minister's letter, quoted Saint Augustine: "Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue."

The Norwegian government's position is a staggering reaffirmation of the global situation: even the greenest governments find it too inconvenient to address the implication of scientific facts. Perhaps our governments are in the hip pocket of the fossil fuel industry – but that is not for science to say.

What I can say from the science is this: the plans that governments, including Norway, are adopting spell disaster for young people and future generations. And we are running out of time.

Stabilizing climate is a moral issue, a matter of intergenerational justice. Young people, and older people who support the young and the other species on the planet, must unite in demanding an effective approach that preserves our planet.

Because the executive and legislative branches of our governments are turning a deaf ear to the science, the judicial branch may provide the best opportunity for redressing the situation. Our governments have a fiduciary responsibility to protect the rights of young people and future generations. I look forward to working with young people and their supporters in developing the legal case for young people and the planet.

To the young people I say: Stand up for your rights, for your future. Demand that the government be honest, admit and face the consequences for you from their policies. To the old people I say: we are not too old to fight. Let us gird up our loins and prepare to fight on the side of young people for protection of the world they will inherit.

I look forward to standing with the youth of the world as they demand their proper due and fight for nature and their future.