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The wrong choice for Massachusetts

By James Hansen
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THE EARTH is close to passing climate change "tipping points." Greenhouse gases released in burning fossil fuels are nearing a level that will set in motion dangerous effects, many irreversible, including extermination of countless species, ice sheet disintegration and sea-level rise, and intensified regional climate extremes.

As a society we face a stark choice. Move on to the next phase of the industrial revolution, preserving and restoring wonders of the natural world, while maintaining and expanding benefits of advanced technology. Or ignore the problem, sentencing humanity and other creatures to struggle on an increasingly desolate planet. Massachusetts is on the cusp of making this choice, and, barring citizen objections, is in danger of making the wrong choice on two counts.

Energy legislation in the state Senate would reshape rules designed to encourage renewable energies, modifying them to encourage energy generation from coal. A proposed amendment to the "Green Communities Act" - in most respects a good piece of legislation - provides incentives for coal gasification

technologies without requiring carbon capture and sequestration. If passed, Massachusetts would be promoting projects that increase greenhouse gas emissions, just when we need to reduce emissions!

Meanwhile, the Department of Environmental Protection granted draft approval and is poised to grant final approval to a project extending the life of an 80-year-old coal plant with coal gasification that would not capture and sequester carbon dioxide emissions. Prolonging the life of NRG Energy's coal-fired power plant in Somerset would be a tragic mistake. This plant was scheduled to shut down in January of 2010 or to "repower" as a new cleaner plant. NRG now proposes to do neither. Instead, it wants to retain its dependence on dirty fuel, converting the plant's boiler to "plasma gasification" of coal.

NRG and state officials have resisted a comprehensive environmental review, demanded by environmental groups like the Conservation Law Foundation, which would compare the greenhouse gases that NRG's proposal is expected to emit over its extended lifetime with other scenarios, including a complete shutdown. The Somerset project should not be rushed through without full environmental review.

If the wonders of nature, our coastlines, and our social and economic well being are to be preserved, our society must begin phasing out coal use until and unless the carbon dioxide emissions are captured and stored. Continuing to build coal-fired power plants without carbon capture will lock in future climate disasters for our children and grandchildren.

The people of Massachusetts took great risk, for the sake of themselves and their progeny, when they drew a line with the British at Lexington and Concord. It is time for a line to be drawn with the powerful special interests, who reap profits from our fossil-fuel addiction.

Changing the course dictated by fossil-fuel interests will not be easy. It requires leadership to define a path with increased support for energy efficiency and clean-energy sources. But this is what citizens must demand, as they tell their government to say no to coal.

The alternative is to shrink from personal responsibility and allow the pleadings and misinformation of special interests, driven by motives of short-term profit, to determine government actions.

But is that a picture of our generation we dare leave for our children, a picture of timidity in the face of special-interest greed?

We live in a democracy. Policies represent our collective will. We cannot blame others. If we allow the planet to pass tipping points, to set in motion irreversible changes to the detriment of nature and humanity, it will be hard to explain our role to future generations.

Today, the citizens of Massachusetts have two opportunities to change this course: first, by contacting legislators and demanding rejection of attempts to subsidize coal through legislation that mistakenly treats coal gasification as a "clean energy" technology; second, by demanding that NRG Energy be held to its original commitment to shut down or repower as a truly new and clean plant.

This is an opportunity for citizens of Massachusetts to exercise leadership again, taking bold actions to oppose entrenched special interests and helping initiate change that is essential if we are to retain a hospitable climate and a prosperous future for our children.

James Hansen is director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies. This column is his personal opinion.