

Dear Governor Greenwash

29 May 2008

My recent experiences with governors raise a question about whether this is an effective way to communicate about climate change. Apologies for the length – you may skip the three tales and go to “bottom line”. But note: I sent the tales to people in these states (Minnesota, Nevada and Virginia), and Will Steger responds that my experience with Governor Pawlenty is atypical -- the Governor has been accessible and responsive; so I qualify conclusions in the “bottom line”.

Dear Governor Pawlenty: (http://columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/20080528_KaineAndPawlenty.pdf)

Minnesota Governor Pawlenty presides over a population that appreciates nature. Explorer Will Steger has done a marvelous job of informing the public there about climate change in the Arctic, the threat of climate change to species and indigenous people, and the relevance of climate change to Minnesota. Early actions made it appear that Minnesota would be a leader, defining energy policies and directions that would be a great example for other states.

Specifically, (get this!) in spring 2007 Minnesota passed and Governor Pawlenty signed a law called the Next Generation Energy Act of 2007, requiring 25% renewable energy standard by 2025 and a 1.5% per year improvement in energy efficiency.

Some people used this to help paint Governor Pawlenty green, second in greenness only to Arnold Schwarzenegger among Republican governors. Pawlenty, according to the Washington Post, is at the top of the list of candidates to be John McCain’s running mate. Coincidentally, the Republican convention will be in Minnesota in September. But ... read on.

I wrote a letter to Governor Pawlenty, to provide information similar to that in my testimony (http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2007/IowaCoal_20071105.pdf) to the Iowa Public Utility Commission regarding the Marshalltown plant and my letters to leaders such as the British Prime Minister (http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/20071219_DearPrimeMinister.pdf). For some reason, despite signing the Next Generation Energy Act, Governor Pawlenty would not take a position against a new large coal-fired power plant, Big Stone II (located in South Dakota but supplying energy to Minnesota). Something didn’t add up.

Junior high school mathematics tells us that a 25% renewable energy standard by 2025 and a 1.5%/year improvement in energy efficiency together eliminate the need for new coal-fired power plants. Could it be that there was no real expectation of pursuing both the renewable energy standard and the energy efficiency requirement?

Big Stone II, from the coal industry perspective, is doubly beneficial: it increases sales and it is a dagger in the chest of renewable energies. In a finite market, renewables can only take off, and reduce their unit costs, by increasing in scale. New coal plants – if they are built – will serve to keep clean energies as bit players in the energy market for decades to come.

But perhaps Governor Pawlenty was just confused. He may not realize the significance of a whopping big coal plant (it takes about 100 rail cars per day to feed one of those suckers). He may not realize that coal trains are death trains for uncountable species. He may not realize the health impacts of mercury and other coal pollutants, and the costs of pollutants for Minnesota citizens. So

I dutifully wrote the above letter to the Governor. Fossil fuel facts therein make clear the urgency of a moratorium on coal-fired power, if we are to avoid dangerous climate tipping points that would spell disasters for our children and grandchildren.

Governor Pawlenty's response, relayed by his spokesman, Brian McClung: "Climate change is an issue that is national and international in scope and cannot be solved by one state. In addition, we must safeguard jobs and our economy as we seek to transition to cleaner sources of energy", as reported in 25 April Argus Leader newspaper. Huh? Sounds familiar. Sounds like Washington. Pass the buck. Bottom line: the Governor did not come out against Big Stone II. Citizens, the courts, may yet stop Big Stone II, but Governor Pawlenty, it seems, will not.

Will McCain choose Pawlenty as a running mate? Would McCain risk "Governor Greenwash", "Governor Hogwash" posters? Naw, I don't think so. We need real leadership.

Dear Governor Gibbons: (http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/20080414_GovernorGibbons.pdf)

I received appeals to help illuminate the situation in Nevada, mostly from people suffering from local coal pollution. It is physically impossible to respond to every request. But Nevada's plans are so egregiously bad as to demand a spotlight. When I realized that I was to receive the Nevada Medal, to be presented by the Governor, I could not pass up the chance to communicate (as it turns out, he was obviously not on the committee selecting the medal winner).

My letter was (you can judge for yourself) friendly, polite and helpful, presenting a clear explanation of why three new coal plants that he was supporting were not in the best interests of Nevada, the Nation, or the Earth. Nevada is a potential goldmine for renewable energy – solar, wind, geothermal. Solar thermal power alone, using just a tiny fraction of the desert area in the Southwest United States, could supply most of the electric power for the entire United States, eliminating the need for coal-fired power. If the state played it smart, they would become wealthy by exporting clean carbon-free energy to California and elsewhere.

The primary function of the proposed new coal-fired power plants in Nevada, as elsewhere, seems to be as a dagger in the chest of renewable energies, by removing the need for them, keeping renewables in their place as boutique, inconsequential competitors. In addition, the coal plants eliminate any need to restructure utility regulations such that utilities could make more money by encouraging energy efficiency, rather than by selling more energy.

The only response from the Governor's office was an angry early AM call to the Desert Research Institute, the host for my visit to Nevada. Fortunately, they could honestly reply that they had no involvement in the letter (indeed, when I had queried their scientists they told me not to waste my time, that it was a hopeless case). Perhaps the annoyance was that I provided copies of my letter to the Nevada Public Utilities Commission and the Nevada Climate Change Task Force.

Or the fact that, in ending my letter on an optimistic note, I pointed out that young people were in the process of organizing to oppose fossil interests. These enthusiastic vocal groups, such as Energy Action, League of Young Voters, Rock the Vote, and several other youth civic groups had identified Nevada as a principal state for voter outreach programs. I noted that youth are not fooled by "green" advertisements or tokenism in political actions, but I tried to be positive: "leaders who

put our nation on a course to carbon-free energy, allowing us to be good stewards of creation, of our planet, will find a strongly supportive public.”

Nevertheless, the Governor did not show up for dinner, which, instead, was hosted in the Governor’s mansion by the First Lady, Dawn Gibbons. The First Lady was a superb host, knowledgeable about energy and climate, concerned about public welfare and Nevada’s future, and especially interested in fairness to and the welfare of our children and grandchildren.

Later I learned that the First Couple were in divorce proceedings, and that there was an attempt to have the First Lady removed from the Governor’s mansion. Even though firearms are common in Nevada, I suppose a ‘Calamity Jane’ takeover is unrealistic. Yet, just perhaps, the citizens of Nevada might consider drafting the First Lady, an experienced former Nevada Legislator, to be the future Governor. And thus, just perhaps, Nevada could provide the social tipping point, the change of direction that leads us from fossil addiction to a more prosperous future, with energy independence, nature preservation, and intergenerational equity.

Dear Governor Kaine: (http://columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/20080528_KaineAndPawlenty.pdf)

This letter to Virginia Governor Tim Kaine was also submitted as an op-ed to the Washington Post, but not published. The Office of the Governor sent a letter in response, included above.

My letter suggests that Governor Kaine could save rate-payers money while helping lead the nation to a cleaner energy future, relying more on energy efficiency and renewable energies. His reply, which may be mostly a form letter, states that the U.S. Department of Energy recognizes the planned Virginia City Energy Center as “clean coal technology. The facility would be capable of using waste coal piles from the coalfield region of Virginia as fuel, which could help reduce the impact of undesirable runoff into Virginia streams.”

This stupefying rationale of burning waste coal to clean the environment is but one cause for concern. The Governor also notes his Energy Plan “goal” of reducing greenhouse gas emissions 30 percent “below what they otherwise would be” in 2025. Oh, boy – reduce “energy intensity” (if we reduce our overeating, we will get fatter, but not as fat as we would have been otherwise). Another quote: “After long and careful consideration, the Governor and I have acknowledged that global warming is a problem caused, largely, though not exclusively, by human activity...”

Governor Kaine was an early endorser of Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy, and is said to be on the short list of vice presidential candidates. Heaven forefend!!

Bottom Line

(1) Urgency of coal moratorium.

A successful strategy to avoid climate calamity must start with a moratorium, and eventual phase-out, of coal-fired power plants that do not capture CO₂. Other actions are needed, including a carbon price that encourages transition to fuels of the future, discourages scrounging for every last drop of oil, and stymies budding efforts to squeeze oil from the dirtiest fossil deposits (tar shale and its ilk). Also improved agricultural and forestry practices will be needed to draw atmospheric CO₂ down. But the urgent, essential action is a coal moratorium.

Side benefits of phasing out coal emissions, for human health and the environment, are so great that it will be feasible to spread a no-dirty-coal energy strategy world-wide once it is started. The West must initiate the moratorium, because the West is responsible for most of the excess CO₂ in the air today. We have the potential for an immediate moratorium, and the West has much to gain from early adoption and technology refinement.

Energy experts agree that efficiency and renewable energies can handle near-term needs for energy growth in the United States. New coal plants are being built only because coal is cheap (as long as it receives government subsidies and is not forced to pay for environmental and health damages), because utilities make more money if they sell more energy, and because the political clout of King Coal stymies adoption of national energy policies in the public interest.

(2) Leadership

Political leaders, in both parties, do not yet appreciate fundamental data such as the bar graph of carbon content of individual fossil fuels. It is not rocket science. We cannot prevent use of easily minable reserves of oil or capture tailpipe emissions. But oil reserves are finite, prices are rising, and emissions will peak and decline. The larger CO₂ source, the one we must cut off at the pass, is coal (and unconventional fossil fuels, squeezing of oil from tar shale and its ilk).

Responses from these three states failed to identify needed leadership. Minnesotans tell me that Pawlenty placed constraints on power plants, making it unlikely that Big Stone II will be built, but he could not go further without offending neighboring governors of his own party. We can reserve judgment in this case, but solution of the climate problem can only be obtained with an unambiguous renunciation of coal except where CO₂ emissions are captured and sequestered.

Lest you get discouraged, let me point out two examples of stellar leadership. Last year Florida Governor (Republican) Charlie Crist responded to a similar plea with force and clarity – he cancelled Florida’s plans for new coal-fired power plants. And well he may have – most of Florida is as flat as a pancake up to the ocean’s edge.

And there is the Governor of Kansas, Democrat Kathleen Sebelius, perhaps the most courageous of all – living in a lion’s pit of well-oiled coal-fired legislators, she came out firmly against new coal-fired power plants on the grounds that they will push climate past the tipping point and destroy the future of our children and grandchildren!! In her final term as Governor, she is a potential candidate for Vice President or for Senator to replace retiring Sam Brownback.

A recent New York Times editorial on global warming concluded: “...Above all, it will require determined and courageous leadership from a president capable of conveying hard truths and asking a lot of the country. Assuming that Mr. McCain and the two Democratic candidates mean what they say, on this issue at least, we seem assured of such a president.”

“Assuming they mean what they say” is the crux of the matter. How can you determine if they possess understanding and “courageous leadership”? Ask them point blank if they support an immediate moratorium on new dirty-coal power plants and phase-out of existing dirty-coal power plants (none of them has, as yet). Ask publicly and broadcast the response. Because, if they are

not ready and willing to act, perusal of fossil carbon reservoirs and junior high school mathematics will together show that Yogi Berra was right: “You can’t get there from here.”

(3) Public Support: Tax and Dividend

Last week the Energy Secretary for the United States, before the House of Representatives, answering questions about global warming and energy policy, provided a response that was so ignorant and foolish as to suggest that he has been living on another planet or is stone deaf to scientific information. He said that the appropriate policy response is for the government to open up more public land for mining, to open off-shore areas for drilling, to open the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve, and to encourage extraction of oil from tar shale.

The danger is that such egregiously bad policy, bad for all but the short-term benefit of special interests, might be packaged to sound logical to the public. This danger will increase when a rising carbon price – essential for solving the climate problem – is instituted. For a carbon price to be effective it must, perforce, be large enough to cause a big impact on the public – otherwise it will not help bring about consumer changes that are needed to reduce emissions fast enough. But it must be implemented with care and foresight.

For this reason I strongly favor a “tax and dividend” approach. The entire carbon tax should be given back to the public, an equal amount to each person. No bureaucracy is needed to figure this out. If an early carbon tax averages say \$1200 per person (it can be collected in various ways – at the well-head, carbon emission permit auctions, etc.) a monthly \$100 deposit can be made automatically in everyone’s bank account.

Although energy prices will rise, you can bet your bottom dollar that lower and middle income people will figure out how to reduce energy use enough that, overall, they come out ahead. And in doing so, moving to more energy-efficient products, they will spur economic activity and create jobs. The tax-and-dividend approach not only minimizes public backlash against climate and energy policies, it also has the characteristics needed to make those policies work.

Footnote: I suggest limiting the number of dividends to four per family. Climate scientists have no special expertise related to the family planning issue, but common sense dictates against a policy that stimulates population growth.

(4) Dilemma

Inability to influence governors, and the finite number of hours in a day, raises a question about the effectiveness of opposing individual power plants. The dramatic change of emissions that is needed requires national policy changes, and that requires public pressure, and/or pressure from enlightened “captains of industry”. Are there better ways to inform those players?

On the other hand, a single large coal-fired power plant burns ~ 100 rail cars of coal in a day, each with ~ 100 tons of coal. Multiply this by ~3 to get the mass of CO₂ produced and by the number of days in 50-75 years, the typical expected lifetime of a power plant. Thus construction of a single coal-fired power plant obviates actions by millions of people to reduce their emissions. Blocking a single coal-fired power plant is important in itself, and it may help lead to a tipping point by demonstrating that efficiency and renewable energies can carry the load.