

CLIMATE CHANGE REQUIRES POLITICAL WILL, ACTIVIST SAYS

By Tim Johnson
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Scientists have spoken on global warming, but the window of opportunity for action is closing fast, and it will take a mass political movement -- something like the civil rights movement -- to avert catastrophe.

So said author and environmental activist Bill McKibben in a talk at Champlain College on Monday afternoon. The difference with the civil rights movement, he said, was that leaders of that knew they would eventually win. By contrast, there's no assurance that the movement to avert disastrous climate change will prevail.

Only a few years remain to make a difference, he said. He pointed to some positive signs: The national awareness of the problem is rising, and the "Step it Up" campaign, which generated more than 1,000 demonstrations across the country last year, set a useful precedent. The necessary changes are huge, but they have to be made rapidly, he said.

"We have to stop building coal-fired power plants. We have to phase out coal over the next 20 years, not develop oil from shale and tar sands," he said. That's just for starters. When asked for one thing an individual could do, he replied: "Politically organize."

McKibben's remarks were Champlain College's keynote to "Focus the Nation," a week of activities on campuses across the country designed to take on the challenge of climate change.

The University of Vermont kicked off its program with a panel discussion of carbon trading -- an enterprise that some in the environmental movement see as an answer to the question of how to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

Introducing the panel, forestry specialist William Keeton of UVM's Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources cautioned the audience of about 60 that carbon trading "is not a silver bullet" in addressing climate change.

That proved to be the understatement of the morning, as some panelists disputed that existing carbon-trading patterns have any climate-change-reducing effects at all.

The discussion covered carbon trading primarily in two forms: a regulated "cap-and-trade" system, a version of which has been implemented in industrialized Europe; and a voluntary, largely unregulated market, growing rapidly in the United States, in which carbon-dioxide emitters can buy offset credits in the form of investments in projects that absorb carbon dioxide (such as a new forest in Brazil) or that displace fossil fuels as an energy source (such as wind turbines in South Dakota).

The larger, global issue is how -- and how fast -- to reduce the human-produced emissions of greenhouse gases (principally carbon dioxide, a byproduct of burning fossil fuels such as oil and coal) that most scientists agree have a heat-trapping, or global warming effect when they continue building up in the atmosphere. One commonly cited goal is to reduce emissions 80 percent by 2050. The sense of urgency grows, and Keeton quoted NASA scientist Jim Hansen as putting the tipping point less than 10 years away.

The remedies won't come cheap, said Keeton's Rubenstein colleague, Cecilia Danks. Substantially cutting emissions will impose a substantial cost, she said, but that cost in the United States is unlikely to come via a carbon tax, which is widely seen as politically unfeasible.

An easier political sell would be a cap-and-trade system, which several panelists agreed is likely to be set up in the United States before long. Under such a system, major emitters -- power plants, for example, are assigned emission ceilings, or caps. If they want to exceed the caps, they have to buy credits to compensate. The caps, which would diminish gradually over years, would be determined in

keeping with a national goal of emissions reductions. \

Two panelists from the United Kingdom took sharp issue with both forms of carbon trading. The problem with the cap-and-trade system in Europe, said Larry Lohmann of The Corner House, an environmental advocacy group, is that it hasn't worked. Major polluters have used their political clout to get their caps raised, he said, and they've been able to exceed their limits by buying offset credits of dubious environmental value. An example of the latter might be a hydroelectric project in India that inundates traditional, low-emitting farming communities and is then counted as an offset for pollution in an industrialized country.

An offset is just what it sounds like, Jutta Kill of the United Kingdom's SinkWatch reminded the audience: It's compensatory, but it does

nothing to reduce overall emissions. More likely, she said, it can be used as an excuse for someone to produce even more emissions.

Much more effective, she said, would be to stop subsidizing fossil-fuel industries and shift that money to renewable and decentralized energy projects.

Another panelist, Secretary of Natural Resources George Crombie, suggested that the efficacy of a carbon-trading system "is only as good as its design."

One of the few upbeat thoughts came from UVM economist Josh Farley, toward the end. He pointed out that the country could cut its energy use and its emissions by a third and still leave people with the same living standard that Americans enjoyed in 1969, when the poverty rate was even lower than today.

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