Climate Disruption, Energy Affordability, and Greenhouse-Gas Accounting in New York

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Gov. Kathy Hochul recently signaled further retrenchment from NY's climate law, the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act of 2019 (CLCPA), telling the Times Union: "If we were not held to a stricter standard for gauging emissions, twenty years versus one hundred years, we'd be one of the top in the nation, almost number one, but we're held to a very different standard" (1). Simply stated, this is wrong. New York is far from being a climate leader, with a little less than one third of our electricity from renewable sources. Eighteen states are doing better, with renewables producing more than half the power in twelve, including Vermont, Maine, and California (2). Globally, seventeen countries produce more of their electricity from renewables than does NY, including Germany, the UK, Australia, and China (3).

What about this "stricter standard?" As one who helped craft the greenhouse-gas accounting methodology in the CLCPA, let me explain. NY banned fracking in 2014 but New Yorkers have continued to use vast quantities of natural gas, mostly fracked shale gas produced in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. Resulting emissions of climate-disrupting methane are high, but these occur largely outside of the boundaries of New York. Fracking for shale gas is extremely energy intensive, so indirect emissions of carbon dioxide (that is, emissions beyond those just from the final burning of the gas) are also high. As with methane, most of these indirect carbon dioxide emissions occur outside of our State. Under the CLPCA's greenhouse gas accounting, New Yorkers take responsibility for these methane and indirect carbon dioxide emissions: the emissions would not occur if New Yorkers were not consuming the gas.

Why twenty years rather than one hundred? Because the world must move away from all fossil fuels, quickly, if we are to manage the growing risks of irreversible runaway climate disruption. We do not have 100 years. In their most recent synthesis, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), stated "*The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human well-being and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future*" (4). Action is needed NOW, with major reductions in emissions from fossil fuels over the coming 15 to 20 years. Further, the science on methane has become ever more clear: methane has caused 30% of all global warming since the industrial revolution, according to the IPCC (5), and a 100-yr accounting greatly understates this impact (6).

What about energy "affordability?" Electric rates tend to be lower in states that generate more from renewables, and the International Energy Agency states that moving more rapidly to renewables is the best way to reduce electricity costs to customers (7). Renewables now contribute more than half to Australia's electric needs, and rates there are falling as the country has moved quickly to more solar and

wind (8). An “all-of-the-above” energy policy causes inflation and is wrong if affordability is the goal. Nuclear power, now pushed by the Hochul administration, is particularly costly and slow to deploy, leaving the electric grid dependent on natural gas (9).

In December 2022, the NY Climate Action Council overwhelmingly approved a blueprint for meeting the State’s climate goals, as required by the CLCPA. Unfortunately, the State has not followed the plan. The “cap and invest” funding mechanism remains stalled (10). Rather than working towards a planned downsizing of the gas infrastructure, utilities are allowed to spend almost $1 billion per year to replace old pipes. These expenditures are the leading cause of inflation for gas prices in NY State (11). These funds are mis-spent, and New Yorkers would be far better served by moving quickly away from gas, in an orderly and planned manner.

The transition away from fossil fuels WILL happen, across the planet and in New York, driven by economics. The question is only how quickly will this occur? And how well managed will the transition be? Without a plan for the downsizing of the gas system, many New Yorkers will be stuck still using gas, and paying for a system supported by an-ever fewer number of customers. Those least able to afford energy costs will be the hardest hit by the resulting inflation in gas costs. The best path forward is to embrace the renewable transition, including 21st Century grid management and beneficial electrification of heating and transportation. New York still has an opportunity to show leadership, and to do so could provide large economic benefits to the State in the future. With Gov. Hochul's strong standing in the polls, she can afford to exercise this leadership. Let’s build a resilient and affordable energy future based on New York’s visionary climate law, the CLCPA, and the Climate Action Council’s blueprint from December 2022 for implementation of the law.

Sources:

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