The Warming Debate

Friday, March 9, 2001; Page A26

EPA ADMINISTRATOR Christine Whitman kicked up a bit of a storm when she said last week that the administration was considering regulating, for the first time ever, power plants' emissions of carbon dioxide. That would be a useful approach toward combating global warming, since power plants account for about a third of U.S. emissions of atmosphere-warming carbon dioxide, and it happens to be something President Bush endorsed during the campaign. Her comments, coupled with a statement that the president "has been very clear that the science is good on global warming," were welcomed by environmentalists. But they set off alarm bells in other quarters. Some coal industry representatives were quick to point out the contradiction between the administration's plans to encourage use of coal and its hopes to cap carbon dioxide emissions, a byproduct of coal combustion. Some senators, also not pleased, wrote to the president calling for clarification of his climate change policy.

Such clarification is indeed needed. Mr. Bush during the campaign wasn't quite as forthright on warming as Mrs. Whitman suggests, but he should be; not many scientists any longer dispute the existence of a problem. But there are tensions between the stated goals of his energy policy, which include increasing domestic supply and holding down prices, and the steps that would help address climate change, which include reducing consumption of fossil fuels. You don't have to endorse the Kyoto protocol, a proposed international treaty that most of the Senate views as flawed, in order to consider how the United States might cut its carbon dioxide production. In fact, unilateral action by the United States to reduce its greenhouse gas emission would not only help slow warming but might also improve U.S. credibility and so facilitate negotiations toward a more workable treaty.

A number of major businesses have led the way by acting on their own to cut their carbon emissions. They have found ways to make progress against global warming while remaining profitable. That was part of the original idea behind bringing carbon into the mix of regulated emissions from power plants, and giving utilities a framework for addressing all of them at once. In the long term that could save utilities money by giving them a chance to address everything up front, instead of facing one regulation after another over time. The longer this country waits to begin coping with climate change, the harder the job will be. Mrs. Whitman should forge ahead.

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