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Climate change? No worries here

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Polls show that global warming has fallen to the bottom of the list of Americans' worries. Meanwhile 170 Michigan professors signed a http://www.freep.com/uploads/pdfs/2009/06/0602_climate.pdf letter calling for tough climate legislation. I read the professors' letter, and I have to say I'm with the people on this one.

Their letter would be more convincing if they weren't so dismissive of the costs involved. They cite unnamed "recent studies" that claim emission cuts could create 150,000 jobs in Michigan. I put more stock in the [http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/servicerpt/s2191/pdf/sroiaf\(2008\)01.pdf](http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/servicerpt/s2191/pdf/sroiaf(2008)01.pdf) analysis by the Energy Information Administration of last year's Lieberman-Warner bill (which is similar to the Waxman-Markey bill now before Congress).

The EIA pointed out that cutting carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions requires driving up energy prices, and this will shrink the economy. U.S. manufacturing would decline by 3% to 7%, depending on how lucky the United States is at developing alternative energy sources, and manufacturing employment will fall between 3% and 10% (p. 39). Of course the professors won't lose their jobs, but they should still be concerned about these things.

It is true that if you could convince taxpayers in the other 49 states to subsidize new, money-losing green energy projects in Michigan, then you might gain some jobs. But when every other state is hoping to pull the same trick on you, it's a zero-sum game. Actually it's worse: Subsidies for green jobs end up reducing national employment, not increasing it.

I also found the letter's scientific content unconvincing. Regional climate forecasting is very conjectural, and models often contradict each other. I suppose it is possible that all four trout species could disappear as a result of a few degrees of warming over 100 years, but if trout were that delicate, the annual arrival of summer would have wiped them out long ago.

As for the litany of potential damages from recent warming trends, I browsed some of the longest weather station histories for Michigan, such as http://data.giss.nasa.gov/cgi-bin/gistemp/gistemp_station.py?id=425726350001&data_set=1&num_neighbors=1 Grand Rapids, http://data.giss.nasa.gov/cgi-bin/gistemp/gistemp_station.py?id=425743650020&data_set=1&num_neighbors=1 Cheboygan and others. There are some trends, but after 1920 they are pretty small, especially considering the known warming bias in long-term climate data from regions undergoing urbanization.

The professors claim that these small trends could, among other things, destroy Michigan agriculture. Let's give farmers a bit more credit. If farmers could not adapt to weather variability, agriculture in Michigan would have disappeared by the 1930s.

Even if the long list of problems could be blamed on CO2 emissions, the professors failed to mention that the small cuts envisioned under the proposed regulations would not change anything. The differences would be minuscule at the global scale, which is where they matter.

Next: Looking at the data on carbon dioxide and temperatures.

Ross McKittrick is a professor of economics at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, where he focuses on environmental economics. Previous guest bloggers, including the three university professors who blogged about climate change June 2-4, are compiled <http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=BLOG2506> here.