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OPINION BUSINESS WORLD

# *How Climate Policy Went Wrong*

A scientist's aerosol research hints at why America's energy suicide isn't helping.



By [Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.](#) [Follow](#)

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Emissions rise from a smokestack in Ohio. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

I chuckle when somebody insists CO2 is a greenhouse gas and that's all there is to it. **Virtually all expert science would say, then, don't worry about CO2 because the direct effect of increased CO2 is easily calculated to be only about 1 degree Celsius of warming from an expected atmospheric doubling later this century.**

To make CO2 responsible for the warming already observed—1.2 degrees—scientists have to posit “positive” or warming feedbacks. In a new paper, veteran NASA scientist James Hansen offers a larger estimate of the (ironically) negative feedback from particulate emissions. This negative feedback (cooling) becomes, in effect, a positive feedback (warming) only because our efforts to curb air pollution allow more sunlight to reach Earth’s surface.

In his overall model, 70% of warming comes from positive feedbacks rather than from CO2 directly, slightly more than in some standard models. These feedbacks start life as exercises in scientific imagination, since they don’t necessarily announce themselves or their magnitude or even direction (warming or cooling). Important feedbacks are believed to include changes in water vapor, darker or lighter clouds, increases in light-absorbing ground cover, decreases in light-reflecting ice, etc.

Amid so much scientific guesswork, a blessing is that the recommended policy, a carbon tax, could be

implemented in “no regrets” fashion, by cutting other taxes in a way that would stimulate global society’s growth and adaptation overall. Here, alas, humanity has gone perhaps irrevocably off the rails, preferring a corrupting fountain of green-energy subsidies instead. Because human appetite for energy is unbounded except by price, subsidizing green energy doesn’t mean less consumption of carbon energy and may even increase it in the absence of a carbon tax.

Mr. Hansen is among the most famous scientist-activists in the field and also among the most honest, deriding international agreements like Kyoto and Paris, insisting on the necessity of nuclear power, calling Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act an “Orwellian” giveaway to special interests.

His latest particulates research, which has been featured repeatedly in the New York Times and Washington Post, is inspired by his oft-stated belief that artificial particulates may be necessary in coming years to cool the planet. **One line the press won’t quote, though, is his group’s explanation of how they reach their particulates estimate. “Aerosol**

impact,” they write, “*is suggested by the gap between observed global warming and expected warming due to GHGs based on ECS inferred from paleoclimate*” (emphasis added).

If that sounds like a lot of spitballing based on a missing variable extrapolated from two different kinds of estimates that are already fuzzy to begin with, it is. Though I will spare you the interpretation, its sheer iffiness is admirably representative of the climate modeling enterprise overall, from which all forecasts flow. We don’t have time travel. We have only one Earth. We can’t experiment on it. We don’t have 50 Earths with different levels of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> that we can compare against each other.

The scientific effort is noble but becoming more and more beside the point. Long before we know which climate forecasts are right, thanks to the inevitable nerds at the Congressional Research Service or Government Accountability Office we’ll know in detail how many trillions we spent on climate subsidies that had no effect on climate.

Another truth may arrive sooner, perhaps even this winter. U.S. natural-gas supply is perfectly ample but activists have prevented the necessary pipelines to meet demand in the Northeast. A recent report by Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the North American Electric Reliability Corp. indicates that last year New York City came dangerously close to running out of gas to maintain apartment-building heat. Had the gas failed, restoring heat to thousands of buildings would have been a job of months, not hours, as technicians went door-to-door relighting boiler pilot lights.

Between the lines of the government report as well as Mr. Hansen's, we have a picture of Americans on a path to commit energy suicide in the name of climate change while doing nothing about climate change.

This isn't sustainable and won't be, but it may well take something like the posited New York City deep freeze. Only then will politicians stop pretending to do something about climate change in favor of actually protecting the energy security of Americans amid a changing climate whose processes are not well

understood and certainly are not being meaningfully ameliorated by public policy.

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## About this article

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Mr. Jenkins joined the Journal in May 1992 as a writer for the editorial page in New York. In February 2004, he moved to Hong Kong as editor of The Asia Wall Street Journal’s

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