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OUR OPINION

EPA emission rules a good, but not great, step forward

By Editorial Board

To say the least, reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide is a good idea. Only the hardest-headed global-warming deniers would deny that, and as the modern Flat Earth Society, their views can be ignored.

To say the most, reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide is an existential imperative. Some scientists argue that mankind is in the middle of what, in geologic time, will be the “Sixth Extinction.” Not too many generations hence, they say, significant numbers of the Earth’s species will be eliminated as a result of catastrophic climate change.

But whether it’s a good idea or an existential imperative, the problem with reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide is that it will impose significant costs on nearly everyone. The problem must be solved by the world’s political systems, which are singularly unsuited for the task.

Today’s politicians are not elected by tomorrow’s voters. So the response by most of the world’s governments mostly has been to kick the can down the road with incremental changes while attending important-sounding meetings that don’t accomplish much.

On Monday the Obama administration took an important step up the road: The Environmental Protection Agency ruled that

by 2030, the nation’s power plants must cut carbon dioxide emissions by a further 17 percent over their 2005 levels. That would create an overall 30 percent reduction.

This is a good thing, but not a great thing. A great thing would be a carbon tax offset by cuts in payroll taxes, an idea favored by conservative and liberal policy wonks alike. If everyone had to pay for the carbon they used in the form of a user tax of, say, \$20 a ton, carbon dioxide emissions could drop far more quickly and painlessly. The Social Security and Medicaid systems would be shored up.

The new EPA rules would reduce carbon dioxide at the same rate as \$10-a-ton tax, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, with far less certainty in costs. But a carbon tax is deemed politically impossible (big donors hate it) while the new EPA rules are only politically difficult.

In announcing the rules on Monday, EPA administrator Gina McCarthy said, “For the sake of our families’ health and our kids’ future, we have a moral obligation to act on climate. This is not just about disappearing polar bears or melting ice caps.”

On Tuesday, in a conference call with the Post-Dispatch editorial board, Ms. McCarthy encouraged citizens, utilities and

politicians to comment on the new rules before they are finalized. She said they had been crafted to be sensitive to individual states' needs. By 2030, she said, the rules would create \$90 billion in climate and public health benefits.

Her "moral obligation" argument so impressed Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., that he immediately blasted the new rules as an "elitist attack" that was nothing more than "Obamacare 2.0." The senator, who is running for re-election in November in a coal-dependent state, vowed to halt the new rules.

Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., was so horrified at what the new rules might do to jobs in Missouri that he started plucking numbers from thin air. Mr. Blunt's news release said Missouri consumers would have to pay \$65.4 billion in added costs between 2014 and 2030, which is either 20 percent or 66 percent of the entire nation's costs, depending on which part of the news release you read.

This kind of garbage is not worthy of serious men, but both Sens. McConnell, 72, and Blunt, 64, will be dead and gone when the global warming bill comes due. In the meantime, they can pander to donors and voters and keep their jobs.

The EPA rules did not impose a one-size-fits-all solution. Because each state has a different level of dependence on fossil fuel energy, each state can choose how to meet its own energy reduction number. In Missouri, where coal accounted for 79 percent of all electricity in 2012, the EPA is calling for a 21 percent reduction by 2030. Conservation has cut usage since 2005; more wind power and participation in a cap-

and-trade program could make that number achievable.

But as with Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, Missouri politicians can be expected to drag their feet. The EPA may eventually impose a solution on Missouri, assuming the new rules withstand congressional and court challenges.

The EPA estimated that the rules would result in the retail costs of electricity rising between 4 percent and 7 percent by 2020. Ms. McCarthy predicted that further conservation would cut average usage by 8 percent in that period, making the new rules an economic wash.

Given that electric bills have risen relentlessly even without carbon dioxide rules, the likelihood is that they will continue going up and that the EPA will be blamed. Nobody wants to pay more for electricity, particularly in an era of record income disparity and stagnant wages for the middle class and the working poor.

At some point, the temptation will be to decide that future generations can fend for themselves; indeed, many Americans already are there. It's not an entirely irrational decision. Even fully implemented, the new EPA rules are expected to shave only 1 percent off the world's carbon dioxide emissions.

Giving up is not worthy of a great people. The United States, with 4.4 percent of the world's population, accounts for 17 percent of the world's emissions of carbon dioxide. If we don't lead, why should the world act? If the world doesn't act, our grandchildren's children will curse our names.

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