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EPA's Proposed Greenhouse Gas Rules: Not Radical But Radically Pragmatic

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As expected, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recent proposal to regulate power plant emissions sparked some mild hysteria on the left and the right. The right says the proposed rules will usher in an economic catastrophe. The left says they are just shy of salvation for the climate. You would think the EPA's proposed greenhouse gas rules were a radical approach to a tough problem – and you'd be half right. Climate change is a very tough problem – but the EPA's proposed solutions are far from radical.

In reality, the state-based approach taken by the agency is perhaps the most practical solution yet proposed to address climate change. That's because it leaves it up to the states and utilities, who best understand their markets, to sit in the driver's seat and use existing technologies and strategies to write their own emissions plans that maintain the affordability and reliability of their electricity. It's a novel, practical approach. This is not just the view from Washington, D.C. Editorials across coal and oil country echoed the same sentiments.

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* declared it “a sensible plan” and warned that critics of the rule “are wrong in assuming nothing good can come of this.” The *Dallas Morning News* stated, “There's much to like about the Obama administration's proposed rules on carbon emissions — especially if critics from the political left and right will take the time to recognize political realities and environmental benefits.” And even the *Lexington Herald Leader*, in Kentucky, said, “...the Obama administration's long-awaited plan for reducing heat-trapping gases from power plants should come as a relief to Kentucky.”

The EPA's proposal in fact reflects four key practical lessons that the Obama Administration learned from past political battles over climate change:

First, it goes with what we've got. Rather than reach for technology that we hope will exist someday, the EPA is asking states to simply start with what they have. If a state burns coal, it should burn efficiently. If electricity comes from gas or nuclear power, that capacity should be maximized. Where renewables exist, they should be expanded—slowly. Efficiency programs should also expand, at manageable rates over time.

Second, it doesn't mess with success. Many states are making progress under existing programs. These include Renewable Portfolio Standards, which increase the share of generation from renewables; demand side management programs, which encourage energy efficiency in homes and businesses; and multi-state efforts such as the Renewable Greenhouse Gas Initiative, which functions as a regional “cap and trade” program for the Northeastern states. Incredibly, some stakeholders argued in advance of the rule that pre-existing programs shouldn't count toward compliance with the power plant rule, and that only new programs should count. The EPA smartly discounted this perspective and is

encouraging successful state initiatives to continue and build upon their track records where they are reducing greenhouse gases.

Third, it embraces creativity. Some opponents, especially the more lawsuit-oriented, argued that the EPA should hew to a narrow slate of options for meeting the new standards and not allow creative approaches that look “beyond the fence line” of the power plant for solutions. Thankfully, the EPA’s proposal strongly encourages states to bring new approaches to the climate challenge; it appears that most any option is on the table so long as it ultimately reduces pollution from power plants.

Fourth, and most importantly, it’s about effectiveness, not ideology. Despite what you’re hearing from the ideologues on both sides of this debate, it’s about the pollution, not about the fuel. Critics are talking about a “war on coal,” but that’s only being waged by their ideological counterparts on the left—not in this policy proposal. Far from targeting coal-fired power, the standard gives states wide latitude to keep coal-fired generation in place if they are willing and able to find the needed emissions reductions somewhere else—even outside their state borders.

Is the proposed rule perfect?

That’s impossible. If it were perfect, it wouldn’t be pragmatic, and pragmatism is going to win this one.

In the coming weeks the states will sort through their individual targets and determine how well EPA’s assessment of their assets reflects the realities they see. And merited or not, some state legislatures are already being pushed to launch pre-emptive strikes on the standards; some of these efforts will surely succeed in complicating things for those states. And then there are the unknowns: we can’t know what kind of technological innovations or pollution reduction strategies might emerge and change the landscape entirely, nor do we know whether science and history will show this effort to be the leading edge of critical change, or just a drop in the bucket. In the meantime, it’s a first, smart step toward a future we can all live with.

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