

January 24, 2011

Dear President Obama,

As the single largest historic user of fossil fuels and emitter of global warming gases, the United States has a moral obligation to lead the world away from harmful energy sources and reduce greenhouse and ocean acidifying gas emissions. Your upcoming State of the Union address is the perfect opportunity to highlight the policies and incentives that are necessary to achieve the aggressive deployment of energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies that are essential.

One thing that you must resist is the pressure to support a so-called “clean energy standard” that includes dirty technologies such as nuclear reactors, coal, natural gas and biomass. A standard that includes these energy sources is really a “dirty energy standard” which will jeopardize our ability to achieve the long term greenhouse gas emissions needed to avoid the worst effects on our climate and our terrestrial and marine sources of food. A dirty energy standard will continue our legacy of environmental destruction and exacerbate our climate crisis.

Some of the dirty energy sources that have no place in any “clean energy standard” include:

Nuclear Reactors: Nuclear energy is not clean and it is not a viable solution to climate change. Nuclear reactors and nuclear fuel cycle facilities emit toxic radiation into our air and water on a routine basis at every stage of the process. By poisoning our air and water, nuclear energy endangers public health and the lives and wellbeing of future generations. After more than 60 years of searching we still have not found a viable solution for dealing with radioactive nuclear waste and most of it is sitting in pools at reactor sites across the country. Any long term disposition will require high level radioactive waste to be shipped across the country, creating immense risk of accidents and incidents all the while moving and not “solving” the waste problem. Despite billions in government subsidies at every stage of the fuel cycle, nuclear reactors remain too expensive to compete with cheaper and cleaner renewable alternatives on the open market, and thus new reactors remain dependent on government financing for any chance of completion. Finally, given the energy demands of the nuclear fuel cycle, from mining to milling, from enrichment to fuel fabrication, from storage to disposition, it is patently ridiculous to suggest that nuclear power is carbon free. Taken together with the safety and proliferation risks implicit to nuclear power, nuclear reactors are clearly a failed technology of the past and not the clean, renewable energy source we need in the future.

Coal: Despite the claims of the coal industry, there is no such thing as “clean coal.” Mining coal poisons local communities’ air, pollutes local water ways, and destroys natural ecosystems. Over 2,000 miles of streams and headwaters that provide drinking water for millions of Americans have been permanently buried and destroyed by mountain top removal to get coal. Burning coal for electricity produces over 1/3 of the greenhouse gas pollution in the United States and releases harmful toxic pollution into our air and water. The over 50 toxic air pollutants such as nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and particulate matter, that result from burning coal are primary causes of health impacts including lung disease, cancer and asthma. The second largest waste stream in the United States is coal ash, a dangerous

byproduct of burning coal that is currently polluting over 600 sites across the country. Currently we produce 131 million additional tons of coal ash each year. Expensive technologies that are supposed to capture and sequester global warming emissions from coal are unproven and they cannot guarantee that these gases actually stay in the ground over the long term. Even if capture and sequester of carbon is successful it will do nothing to reduce the other environmental and public health impacts that result from mining and burning coal or the waste that results.

Natural Gas: Natural gas may burn “cleaner” than coal on the short term, but it is still a significant source of global warming emissions that also releases harmful air pollutants. Natural gas should not be supported with government mandates. In the long term, just like coal, natural gas is unsustainable and damaging to the climate and the environment. Burning natural gas results in the release of harmful air pollutants including particulate matter, nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide. Extracting natural gas can be extremely damaging to the environment and local communities, particularly when methods such as hydraulic fracturing are used. Hydraulic fracturing requires vast quantities of water, releases dangerous chemicals into the soil as part the process and can lead to water contamination and pollution. Additionally, wells that are hydraulically fractured are exempted from the Safe Drinking Water Act, putting millions of people’s drinking water at risk. Meeting our energy needs with natural gas in the long term will require increasingly harmful extraction processes, as it has with oil exploration, and inevitably it will require the importation of foreign sourced gas—which will require consumption of fossil fuels for transport and will keep the United States at risk of foreign pressure and manipulation for its energy needs.

Biomass: Burning organic matter to produce energy is inherently polluting, and burning biomass is no exemption. Energy mandates and incentives that include biomass and do not include protections for natural ecosystems will drive the destruction of forests and other natural ecosystems. Extracting biomass from forests to be burned for electricity or heat can harm the health and biodiversity of forests. Burning biomass causes significant air pollution that is harmful to human health due to the large quantity of pollutants – such as particulate matter, volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides – that are emitted. In fact, many of these air pollutant emissions can be just as high from plants using bioelectricity as from those using coal. These emissions are toxic and can result in respiratory issues and even cancer when inhaled, making biomass burning facilities harmful to local populations. Science shows that burning biomass can contribute as much or more to global warming as burning coal per unit of energy created. Additionally, converting land from natural forests to bioenergy production reduces the carbon sequestering traits that occur in natural forests, particularly when poor forest management techniques are used to extract biomass. Compounding this, EPA has recently agreed to exempt all biomass facilities from regulation for greenhouse gas emissions.

During your State of the Union address, you have the opportunity to lead the United States and the world by calling for the deployment of truly clean and renewable energy. We urge you take this occasion and to reject proposals for a dirty energy standard that include dirty and dangerous technologies such as nuclear reactors, coal, natural gas or biomass.

Sincerely,

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