

As Judged by your Piers Whither the ETS?

Call me a pessimist if you like, but carbon trading is going nowhere. The concept is intrinsically flawed: it assumes that people and nations have an unbelievable degree of self-sacrifice, organisational capacity and goodwill. Serious emission reductions could never be achieved without serious grief. If reducing emissions was economically beneficial, why didn't this happen anyway - without any incentives?

Let's face it, humans have evolved to organise themselves in tribal groups of no more than 150 people using technology no more complex than woven baskets and fish-spears, and facing problems as immediate and personal as a drought or an invading tribe. Since then, we have progressed far and away beyond our level of competence. The situation is not helped by Greenhouse Sceptics, many of whom are unlikely to ever change their view regardless of facts or arguments. (Major conceptual changes of this nature require several generations to become accepted - there must be sufficient time for naysayers to die out.)

At time of writing, the NZ Emissions Trading Scheme is hanging in the balance and may not pass into law. Even if it does, the National Party is likely to form the next government and their policy has not yet been announced. My bet is that they will link up with the Australian scheme, which suggests delay, delay and yet more delay. Does any of this matter? Not really, as solutions to Climate Change do not lie in government policies. Any government that imposes genuine personal financial hardship on its citizens in exchange for distant and poorly understood future benefits is doomed to lose an election.

So we will muddle along until the end of the First Commitment Period. What happens then? Will there be a Son of Kyoto? Not a chance. Tensions divide the world, although couched in diplomacy-speak. My reading is that China wants to use its vast coal reserves to propel its population towards Western affluence and international respect. Russia hopes to cash in on its supplies of so-called "hot air" as well as oil. Saudi Arabia wants compensation for loss of oil revenues. The United States public feels it invented both democracy and wealth and refuses to be beholden to any super-national organisation. And so on. In short, every nation agrees that something needs to be done - but only by others.

How would a biologist view this dismal scene? They would ask if Evolution has discovered a way around the free-rider problem during four billion years of evolution. Answer: no, it has not. Genes are selfish because that is the best way they can survive and reproduce. There are undoubted merits in co-operation, but any attempt at personal sacrifice for the collective good will inevitably be torpedoed by the selfish exception posing as a community-minded altruist.

Every time I walk down the street, I wade through

endless piles of litter and contemplate the analogous problem: the owner of the empty beer-bottle or cigarette packet does not want to carry it any further. The rubbish has achieved its purpose and can be discarded, with a personal gain and at no personal cost. The owner may be aware of the disbenefit to the entire community, but this is irrelevant. So, I suggest we can solve the problem of Global Warming only if we can also solve the littering problem on my street. What is the answer to both?

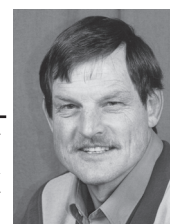
The answer, as a Japanese inventor has discovered, is to turn discarded plastic bags into a crude bio-diesel using a simple home-based device. The answer is for aluminium Coke cans to be sufficiently valuable for street-kids to brawl over the salvage rights. The answer - as I tried to promote when I worked at FRI in Rotorua - is for paper wrappings to decompose rapidly when subjected to water and sunlight.

With specific regard to greenhouse gases, the answer is to make renewable energy cheaper and more convenient than fossil fuels. We will gladly switch to biofuels when it is available at the petrol pump at a lower price than Arab oil and with better performance. We will use the buses when they can get us to our destination faster and more conveniently than our own car. We will reject electricity from Huntly coal when it is cheaper to put solar panels on our roof. And so on.

The solutions do not lie in government decrees or in convoluted trading mechanisms, but in alternative technologies. Governments don't have enough money to tip the balance of prices against economic fundamentals, but they can promote and encourage steps in the right direction. Such technologies are bound to occur in due course as fossil fuels become scarce and more expensive to extract, but everyone would gain from a speedier and smoother transition.

Which gets us to forestry. Scion Chief Executive Dr Tom Richardson says that by utilising planted forests as energy crops, New Zealand could ultimately meet its heat and transport fuel needs without relying on fossil fuels. That is a powerful statement, and I invite readers to read it again. A wise government would wrack its brains to see how such an initiative could be supported.

It's ironic that when the circling wolves sought a nocturnal meal, an open fire provided Mankind's first security. Now, many millennia later, once again we may rely on wood for our very survival.



* Piers Maclaren is a Registered Forestry Consultant and a former Forest Research scientist. His column appears regularly in the Journal.