March 7, 2013

Comments on Development of an Investment Plan for California’s Cap & Trade Auction Proceeds

The general comments I shared last year (see <http://www.arb.ca.gov/lispub/comm2/bccommlog.php?listname=investmentplan-ws>

#50) still pertain. They offer a theoretical and practical foundation for any investment plan.

Receiving the invitation for further suggestions, I have 2 potential projects to share.

The first project involves a ban on all urban landscaping machinery using engines or motors. This offers everyone an opportunity to practice adapting to the planet (rather than adapting the planet to our temporary fossil-fuel lifestyles) and grappling with advisable changes in technology, without any hazard to survival or real comfort.

Specifically, phasing in such a ban in one year would bring about sensible, widespread, nuts-and-bolts attention to the practice of actually adapting and changing. If property owners and others who employ landscaping services would simply continue, for a year, their existing monthly payment for service, that would give all landscapers time to prepare for using strictly manual tools. And those who maintain their own property with such machinery should also prepare for change.

At the beginning of this transition year, landscapers and their customers would need to have a conversation about how best to utilize the same amount of work time as before, except with traditional tools. During this year, landscapers and do-it-yourselfers should be offered workshops or even apprenticeships on how to truly garden, in ways that are best for the plants themselves. Urban farming is another excellent workshop topic for our climate-change era. Organizing and offering these workshops is an opportunity for sustainable investment, appropriate for cap-and-trade auction proceeds.

And even if this idea doesn’t work out, investing in scholarships for disadvantaged youth to attend a standard 2-week intensive Permaculture Design Course workshops would further the state’s commitment to environmental justice.

In general, current mow-and-blow landscapers seem to think their job description is just to run a bunch of machines around, rather than to nurture and attend to plants; thus there is great potential for learning sustainable skills. Moreover, this process would increase comfort by reducing noise pollution and replacing fossil-fuel engines and motors with healthy exercise. More information about noise pollution (the orphan form of air pollution) can be found at: <http://www.newsreview.com/sacramento/dirt-blasters/content?oid=1864716>

The key advantages of this proposal are that it would not necessarily cause any job loss nor increased financial costs for property owners. While front yards and neighborhoods might not look exactly the same as before such a ban, any such changes would not have any necessary or material negative impact on anyone’s actual comfort or enjoyment of life. Thus, such a manageable challenge is a very promising opportunity for people to begin to adapt now, while it’s easy, and in an area of life where there is no real threat and mistakes won’t be dangerous.

The second project arises from the observation that many policy analysts and scientists believe a carbon tax would be more effective and less corruptible than cap & trade. However, until a carbon tax is approved, there may be another option that’s somewhat in between the two.

Specifically, that option is a labeling system such that every product sold in any retail context could be labeled by having a sticker affixed to it before sale, a sticker that would specify the amount of fossil fuels or the amount of equivalent carbon emissions that was entailed in its whole supply chain. The stickers would be allowed to show an insignia such as that of the seal of the State of California, and would be required to name the product in question. CARB’s role would be limited to verifying and approving the emissions estimates submitted by any party wishing to pursue the printing of such stickers.

As above, any increase in anyone’s expenses would be modest relative to the possible benefit. Since manufacturers and other businesses may resist the costs of making sure such labels accompany all products which have a fossil-fuel footprint, private citizens and advocacy organizations could would be given the right to petition for and receive the right to print such labels. Cost-conscious advocacy organizations would prioritize their calculations and printing for products with higher emissions. And consumer-friendly manufacturers would leave space on packages for the labels.

Upon timely CARB review and approval, the petitioner would then have the right to print up as many labels as desired, and private citizens would be granted the right to enter any retail establishment during any normal hour of operation and affix the labels appropriately and accurately.

This process would leverage grassroots energy to substantially increase the amount of information available to consumers on climate change impacts due to our ordinary habitual daily activities, while minimizing economic costs. Its effect would be similar to that of a carbon tax, in that it would influence consumer decisions, but without actually reducing anyone’s retail freedom nor increasing businesses’ expenses.

Lastly, investing these auction proceeds in ways such as these two, that help ordinary individuals wring out excess and unnecessary energy use by adapting and changing to a thrifty and nonmaterialistic lifestyle, offers substantial leverage for convincing the Chinese (for example) that happiness and economic harmony are better served by stepping off the more-is-better, growth-is-good merry-go-round, and evolving a balanced economy that most efficiently transforms energy and resources into ‘clean air and water, healthy food, snug shelter, and plenty of sleep and exercise.’