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Guest Opinion: State must put energy needs before climate change legislation

By WEBB BROWN

For the last few years, the issue of global warming has risen to the forefront of our country's political debate. Here in Montana, the Legislature will probably have dozens of bills in the 2009 session to address the concerns surrounding climate change.

Dialogue started

As the discussion over the scientific opinions on global warming continues, a new and essential part of the debate is surfacing: the economics of climate change legislation.

More specifically, do Montana and the United States stand to lose jobs and face rising electricity and gasoline prices through proposed legislation that does little to reduce carbon emissions worldwide?

The Montana Chamber recently organized a "Climate Change Dialogue" in Billings where economic experts unveiled a national and Montana-specific study on the economic impacts of federal climate change legislation, such as the Lieberman-Warner bill to mandate a carbon cap-and-trade system.

The results of the study were startling. The low-end estimates were that 4,000 to 6,000 Montanans could lose their jobs as a result of Lieberman-Warner by 2020. The benefits of any added jobs from new alternative energy production will be greatly overshadowed by jobs lost in other energy sectors. Additionally, the price of gasoline would increase between 74 percent and 140 percent by 2030, and the price of electricity would increase by 96 percent to 133 percent during that same time.

Sen. Joe Lieberman, a co-author of the bill, admitted the legislation would cost "hundreds of billions of dollars." These costs will be passed down the ladder to Montana families who are already concerned about high energy prices.

What is our return on this investment of great proportions? Experts predict they could reduce carbon emissions worldwide by 3 percent in the long-run. Without developing countries like China and India making similar changes, there will not only be little

environmental impact from our state and national changes, but we will also be restricting our own economy that is competing directly with these developing nations.

Environmentalists and some lawmakers dismiss these economic concerns by saying we cannot afford to do nothing on the issue of climate change. One problem with their argument, however, is that all of the proposals will have no significant impact worldwide to reduce carbon emissions from current levels.

Cleaner use of oil, coal

Our great state does have a bright future when it comes to alternative energy sources, such as wind, solar, biodiesel and more. But in order to keep up with the rising demand for energy, we will also need to continue to develop coal, oil and natural gas. The alternative energy sources will be additional energy while we make traditional sources of energy cleaner and more efficient with advancements in technology.

Montanans must demand that their state and national lawmakers address these economic concerns before acting on the issue of global warming. It is simply unacceptable if Montanans will pay significantly more for electricity and gasoline, and possibly even lose their jobs, for legislation that has minimal worldwide impact on reducing greenhouse gases.

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