

Earth Day's good news: Column

Bjørn Lomborg 11:04 a.m. EDT April 22, 2013

Shale gas revolution has curtailed U.S. carbon dioxide emissions.



(Photo: Jacquelyn Martin, AP)

Year after year, we are treated to a message of environmental doom and gloom and admonitions on Earth Day. On the back of this sentiment in wealthy countries, governments have invested billions of dollars in inefficient, feel-good policies such as [subsidizing solar panels](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/02/06/cutbacks-in-subsidies-indicate-future-solar-may-be-dimming/) and [electric cars](http://content.usatoday.com/communities/driveon/post/2012/02/president-obama-budget-electric-car-subsidies-chevrolet-volt/1).

But there are far better ways to improve environmental prospects for humanity and our planet. On Earth Day, we need more fracking, more wealth, smarter investments and fewer inefficient subsidies.

German taxpayers have poured \$130 billion into subsidizing solar panels, but ultimately by the end of the century, this will postpone global warming by a trivial 37 hours. The electric car is even less efficient. Its production consumes a vast amount of fossil fuels, and mostly it utilizes fossil fuel electricity to be recharged. Even if the U.S. did reach the lofty goal of 1 million electric cars by 2015 — costing taxpayers more than \$7.5 billion — global warming would be postponed by only 60 minutes.

These beguiling policies cost a fortune but make little difference to the environment because the technologies are still not ready. That's why we need to invest more in long-term research and development for green innovation. This would be much cheaper than current environmental policies and would end up doing more good for the climate.

If we could make solar panels 2.0 or 3.0 cheaper than fossil fuels, we could get everyone, including the Chinese and Indians, on board for a greener future.

Moreover, our focus on solar and electric cars diverts us from the world's most deadly environmental problems. In wealthy countries, most environmental indicators are getting better. We have cleaner air and cleaner water, and we suffer fewer environmental risks. But air and water pollution kill 6 million people each year and harm billions worldwide.

Wealthy countries largely solved these problems through economic development.

Poor countries should have the same opportunity to develop — so they, too, can have clean drinking water and switch to cleaner energy sources, instead of using dung or twigs for fuel.

We can also directly intervene in poor countries. Many charitable organizations are involved in solving these problems by improving access to clean water and sanitation. By addressing these challenges, we do far more good for our planet.

Earth Day also presents an opportunity to recognize our own environmental achievements. In spite of decades of political wrangling, which failed to produce a meaningful global climate policy, it was ultimately the shale gas revolution that curtailed U.S. carbon dioxide emissions.

Fracking has caused a dramatic transition to natural gas, a fuel that emits 45% less carbon dioxide than burning coal. Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration showed that in 2012, carbon dioxide emissions was 12% lower than the peak in 2007. The shift from coal to natural gas is alone responsible for a reduction of between 8%-9% of the entire U.S. CO2 emissions. In fact, it amounts to twice the reduction that the rest of the world has achieved over the past 20 years.

All energy projects have risks, and though the dangers of well contamination from fracking have probably been exaggerated, tighter regulation would reduce risks further. Also, natural gas is not the ultimate energy breakthrough because it is still a fossil fuel. Even so, fracking is likely the best green option of this decade. And if fracking happened worldwide, emissions would likely decline substantially by 2020. Over the coming decades, we need to drive down the cost of green energy through smart investments in green innovation.

This Earth Day, we need a dose of realism about real environmental challenges — such as the air and water pollution that make life so miserable for billions — and the real opportunities that exist for environmental innovation, to make our planet a better place.

Bjørn Lomborg, author of The Skeptical Environmentalist and Cool It, is president of the Copenhagen Consensus Center.

In addition to its own editorials, USA TODAY publishes diverse opinions from outside writers, including our Board of Contributors (<http://www.usatoday.com/reporters/boc.html>).