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Op-Ed Contributor

**Don't Waste Time Cutting Emissions**

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Copenhagen

WE are often told that tackling global warming should be the defining task of our age — that we must cut emissions immediately and drastically. But people are not buying the idea that, unless we act, the planet is doomed. Several recent polls have revealed Americans' growing skepticism. Solving global warming has become their lowest policy priority, according to a new Pew survey.

Moreover, strategies to reduce carbon have failed. Meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, politicians from wealthy countries promised to cut emissions by 2000, but did no such thing. In Kyoto in 1997, leaders promised even stricter reductions by 2010, yet emissions have kept increasing unabated. Still, the leaders plan to meet in Copenhagen this December to agree to even more of the same — drastic reductions in emissions that no one will live up to. Another decade will be wasted.

Fortunately, there is a better option: to make low-carbon alternatives like solar and wind energy competitive with old carbon sources. This requires much more spending on research and development of low-carbon energy technology. We might have assumed that investment in this research would have increased when the Kyoto Protocol made fossil fuel use more expensive, but it has not.

Economic estimates that assign value to the long-term benefits that would come from reducing warming — things like fewer deaths from heat and less flooding — show that every dollar invested in quickly making low-carbon energy cheaper can do \$16 worth of good. If the Kyoto agreement were fully obeyed through 2099, it would cut temperatures by only 0.3 degrees Fahrenheit. Each dollar would do only about 30 cents worth of good.

The Copenhagen agreement should instead call for every country to spend one-twentieth of a percent of its gross domestic product on low-carbon energy research and development. That would increase the amount of such spending 15-fold to \$30 billion, yet the total cost would be only a sixth of the estimated \$180 billion worth of lost growth that would result from the Kyoto restrictions.

Kyoto-style emissions cuts can only ever be an expensive distraction from the real business of weaning ourselves off fossil fuels. The fact is, carbon remains the only way for developing countries to work their way out of poverty. Coal burning provides half of the world's electricity, and fully 80 percent of it in China and India, where laborers now enjoy a quality of life that their parents could barely imagine.

No green energy source is inexpensive enough to replace coal now. Given substantially more research, however, green energy could be cheaper than fossil fuels by mid-century.

Sadly, the old-style agreement planned for Copenhagen this December will have a negligible effect on temperatures. This renders meaningless any declarations of "success" that might be made after the conference. We must challenge the orthodoxy of Kyoto and create a smarter, more realistic strategy.

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