

Editorial: The hidden costs of a gallon of gas are rising

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(Pedro Molina)

This month marks the second anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico that killed 11 workers and leaked 4.9 million barrels of crude oil, causing extensive damage to marine and wildlife habitats and to the area's fisheries and tourism industry. The spill's local impact still unfolds.

Now the nation is in the midst of an election-year energy debate -- with mostly a sole focus on rising prices at the pump -- that is, in light of the Gulf disaster, woefully shortsighted. This is underscored by a recent report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The organization calculated that world energy use is on pace to increase 80 percent by mid-century, with 85 percent of the energy coming from fossil fuels. Carbon emissions will double by 2050, which would likely push global temperatures past the target of two degrees Celsius, beyond which scientists say climate change could be extremely dangerous. Air pollution also will increase along with the incidence of cardiovascular disease, asthma and other health consequences.

The organization suggested putting a cost on polluting and greenhouse gas emissions with carbon taxes and cap-and-trade practices. Given the dangers ahead of us, these market-driven trading mechanisms seem a better option than federal micromanagement -- the current policy of both political parties.

Besides an honest admission that we really can't drill our way to continuing cheap gas, what's missing as well from the current debate is any acknowledgment of the rising hidden costs of that gallon of gas at the pump. The kind of risky offshore mile-deep drilling that precipitated the Gulf spill is a case in point.

After a moratorium, the White House put in place tougher drilling requirements, then opened new areas to development in the Gulf and in remote parts of the Arctic that are a 1,000 miles from the nearest Coast Guard base. House Republicans have pushed through legislation that speeds drilling plan reviews and opens even more new areas. "The Republicans and the oil industry are maintaining the speed-over-safety mentality that led to the BP disaster in the first place," said Rep. Edward Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat who had been critical of the president's response to the spill from the BP-leased rig. What's more, House Republicans are even pressing now to open the Atlantic and Pacific coasts to drilling, politically off limits since the 1969 Santa Barbara oil

spill.

Are we so hopelessly addicted to fossil fuels that we will cave in again and again to the oil industry, putting in harm's way the fragile Arctic, our other two coasts, and even risking the country's heartland if Keystone pipeline proponents prevail?

A success on another front in energy policy demonstrates how some pollution management can prepare the way for constructive change.

On March 27 the Environmental Protection Agency proposed the first-ever limits of greenhouse gas emissions from new power plants. The rule -- tagged the Carbon Pollution Standard -- wouldn't apply to some 15 plants that are expected to break ground next year but after that, coal-fired plants would have to capture and store some of their carbon dioxide emissions. An expensive measure, this practice isn't in use anywhere presently.

"These first-ever carbon pollution standards for new power plants mean that business as usual for the nation's biggest sources of carbon pollution, dirty coal-burning utilities, is over," Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune said.

Sr. Karen Donahue, a justice coordinator for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas from Michigan, said: "We commend the EPA for taking this important step to reduce emissions that are fueling global warming and catastrophic climate change."

The EPA move lays groundwork for efforts to find cleaner and more sustainable ways to generate power.

More and more of these kinds of efforts will result in a clean-energy nation. Making it so will present us a challenge equal to other major projects in our history -- the transcontinental railroad, the Panama Canal, the interstate highway system, the Apollo space project. These undertakings required pushing the envelope of technological development and also spurred business opportunity, creating many new jobs and whole new industries.

Moving toward energy independence from cleaner sources and away from the greenhouse-gas-emitting, fossil-fuel burning, mountaintop-leveling, air-polluting way of life can unite us in a common endeavor, and ensure that the gravely damaged wetlands and economic suffering on our Gulf Coast were not in vain.

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