

Watt's Happening? #152

by Don Pettit

for Peace Energy Renewable Energy Cooperative

www.peaceenergy.ca ph 250-782-3882



Climate action: now or never

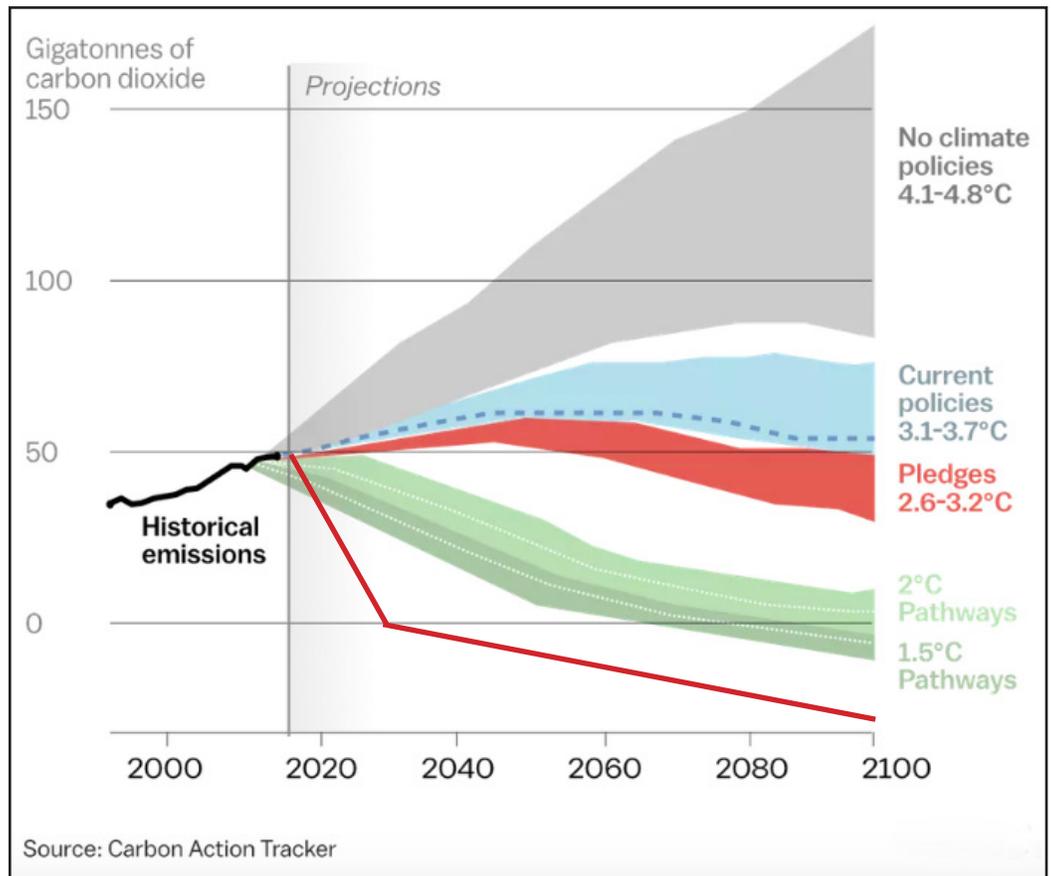
Recently I overheard an interesting conversation about climate change. (No, I wasn't eavesdropping. Sometimes you just can't help but hear...)

At first I was encouraged. That's a good thing: the topic has entered the realm of common conversation!

But then I heard a bit more. It ran something like this: the climate has been changing for millions of years, and we don't know enough about it to predict what will happen in the future. It's all very iffy, and if we're not sure it is happening, then of course we're not sure what we should do about it or even if we should bother.

A solid, common sense, practical approach that is held, I am sure, by many. Too bad it is forty years out of date and deadly wrong.

This common belief is based on two very common misconceptions about science and technology: we greatly underestimate what we now KNOW, and we greatly underestimate what we can now DO.



The most recent reports suggest that this graph, prepared two years ago, was overly optimistic. The bottom red line is what we now have to achieve to avoid the worst effects of the climate crisis: cut our carbon emissions in half by 2030, and essentially reduce them to zero by the end of the century. This is still entirely doable, but requires unprecedented coordinated effort on a global scale.

WHAT WE KNOW

You have probably seen a photo of the Earth from space. The best ones show the whole Earth floating in an infinite sea of blackness.

Look closely at the edge of the planet. You'll see a thin blue line hugging the surface. That's our atmosphere. This skim of usable air is only about 30 kilometers thick on a planet that is 13,000 kilometers in diameter. In relative thickness, it is like the skin of an apple.

We know this. We also know a lot about how our atmosphere works.

We know that having a tiny bit of carbon dioxide, methane and other so called "greenhouse" gases in our atmosphere makes life possible by holding in a bit of heat. Without that tiny bit of carbon dioxide, Earth's oceans would be a solid block of ice and nobody would be living here.

We also know that the more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the more it will warm. This has been studied to death now, and there is no longer the slightest debate: adding billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year for many decades, as we have done, IS causing the global atmosphere to warm, dramatically and quickly, and that warming IS destabilizing the global climate. Dramatically and quickly.

A destabilized climate is not something we want. You have probably heard the horror stories: sea level rise, more storms, floods, droughts and fires, failed crops, massive migrations of million of environmental refugees . . . a total and complete world-wide mess. And it has begun.

We are not talking unproven theories or iffy speculation about some distant future. We're talking right now about a world that the children living today will not enjoy at all and that WE must deal with.

The really, really good news is that we know exactly what to do and we now have the tools in our hands to do it. No new technologies are required to solve our climate crisis. Only leadership is lacking.

ALBERTA: AN EXAMPLE

Alberta is hurting. Widespread unemployment and real hardship. Why?

Isn't it obvious? Didn't they over-rely on a single resource economy? And a resource that is more and more difficult and costly to extract, ship to markets, justify environmentally, and one that is famous for its unpredictable boom and bust cycles.

Is the answer to Alberta's employment problems therefore MORE oil and gas? Perhaps not. Perhaps they should consider diversifying their economy to other, more modern, less controversial energy sources that provide immediate solutions to our very, very real climate crisis.

Out of desperation, Alberta has made the wrong political choice. There will be NO shortage of jobs if we admit our plight and undertake the massive re-training and re-structuring that we so desperately need.

Sure, we can all do our little bit to help, and of course we should. But what we most need is a comprehensive and well-considered transition plan at the highest levels of government. Nothing less will do.

Please, think about this very carefully next time you get a chance to vote. There is only one way forward, and there is no more time for debate. It's action, now or never.

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