

POLICY NOTE

The phony climate science of Physicians for Social Responsibility

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March 2018

Key Findings

1. A Physicians for Social Responsibility study on climate change and air quality contradicts the claims of the very study it cites and the data in Washington state.
2. The impact claimed by PSR is based on a worst-case scenario far beyond what the U.N.'s IPCC says is likely.
3. PSR notes that Yakima County has some of the worst air quality in Washington state, but cites cars as the cause, despite having a low number of cars.
4. PSR calls for "safe bike lanes, bike share programs," and other expenditures that have no relation to the air quality of a rural county like Yakima.
5. PSR also claims "fossil-fuel fired electricity generating units" are the cause of air pollution, even though air quality is excellent near the state's only coal-fired plan.

The debate over imposing carbon taxes on people's energy use is heating up in our state and those advocating big-government policies are offering a range of justifications for their approach. Tellingly, the justifications they offer, especially during the 2018 legislative session, are often unrelated to their proposed solutions.

The latest case in point is offered by a group calling itself, "Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility" (PSR), who say lawmakers should use a measure called the "Health Co-Benefits of Climate Change Mitigation in Washington State."

Ranging from reductions in air pollution to improved diet, they claim imposing an expensive carbon tax is justified because it would reduce health impacts. Their claims, however, are quite flimsy and their examples demonstrate that the supposed solutions they promote do not match the problem.

Phony air-quality claims

Although they cite a range of purported benefits, I will focus in this analysis on their claims regarding air quality. For example, they note, "The American Lung Association recognized Yakima as the 16th most polluted city for short-term air particle pollution." Poor air quality, they argue, increases a range of maladies, including "1,100 premature deaths in 2009 in our state alone." Additionally, they claim the overall health benefits of a carbon tax would amount to between two dollars and \$380 per ton of CO₂ reduced.

There are several problems with these claims and their insinuation that a carbon tax would help solve these air-quality problems.

First, the broad range of supposed health benefits indicates how speculative their "science" truly is. Providing a cost estimate that ranges from two dollars to \$380 is essentially useless.

The underlying study (Chang et al.) cited by PSR admits, "The broad range of policy scenarios limits more detailed statements that mitigation policies would result in health co-benefits..."¹ The study authors

1 Kelly M. Chang, et al., "Ancillary health effects of climate mitigation scenarios as drivers of policy uptake: a review of air quality, transportation and diet co-benefits modeling studies," Environmental Research Letters, October 27, 2017, <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa8f7b/pdf>, p. 6

themselves admit the best they can offer is that predicted benefits are not zero. This vague finding has no value as a guide to sound policy.

Selecting an unrealistic worst-case scenario

Second, the authors of the Chang et al. study admit the benefits of a carbon tax are derived by assuming the worst-case climate-change scenario. Most of the studies they analyze use the most extreme estimate developed by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

That scenario, known as RCP 8.5, “was used as the baseline for several studies to represent future conditions under a no mitigation policy scenario.”² The projections in that scenario are far above current global temperature trends and beyond all likely projections for real energy use and population growth. Thus, the estimated cost projections are the high-water mark, with actual benefits being far below these projections.

Proposed solution does not match the problem

Finally, the biggest problem with PSR’s claims is that the policy they advocate would not solve the problem they use to justify imposing a carbon tax. Chang et al. set a standard for identifying co-benefits of a carbon tax, writing:

“For co-benefits studies to support a case for or against a particular climate policy, Jack and Kinney (2010) suggest they must specify: meaningful scenarios, translation of policy into behavior, influence of behavior on emissions, relationship of emissions to health-determinant exposures, and quantification of health outcomes as results of exposure.”³

PSR’s support for carbon taxes fail this scientific test.

For example, PSR does not even attempt to demonstrate how or how much the policy would reduce environmental impacts. Chang et al. note, “power plants, certain industrial processes, mobile sources, and agricultural activities are sources of GHG emissions” and of traditional air pollution like particulate matter. As PSR noted, in 2016, Yakima had poor air quality. How would a carbon tax solve that problem? The answer is: It wouldn’t.

The air quality problem in Yakima is not caused by motor vehicle emissions. Despite that fact, in the list of its “Policy Recommendations,” PSR argues, “Safe bike lanes, bike share programs, pedestrian bridges, and increased bus and rail density must be accompanied by increased fuel cost via putting a price [tax] on carbon pollution.”

As a rural county, these proposals are completely incompatible with the reality of the people living in Yakima. Despite mentioning Yakima specifically as an area that would be helped by improved air quality, the policies being proposed are related to the problems of large cities with dense populations, like Seattle.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 2



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Published by
Washington Policy Center
© 2018

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206-937-9691

Additionally, there are no coal or natural gas generating stations near Yakima. Again, however, PSR points to fossil fuel-generating plants as the supposed cause of poor air quality, noting, "Studies have shown that thousands of lives can be saved per year through reducing fossil fuel-fired electricity generating units." This statement is unrelated to the reality of energy production in Washington state.

Washington already ranks lowest in carbon emissions

Washington state already ranks 50th, the lowest, in the nation for CO₂ emitted per unit of energy. Electricity generated from fossil fuels simply is not affecting air quality in the state. In fact, the state Department of Ecology does not even maintain air quality monitoring in Centralia, the location of the state's only coal-fired plant.

After identifying air quality as a significant health concern, how does PSR claim the governor's proposed carbon tax would reduce that risk? Despite arguing that health "savings could be quantified well into the billions," they offer no mechanism or quantification for achieving those supposed savings, a requirement their own study says is an obligation.

An unscientific and irresponsible approach

In total, the Physicians for Social Responsibility approach is unscientific and irresponsible, with several problems:

- The studies PSR cites are vague and imprecise;
- PSR assumes a worst-case scenario far beyond what the U.N.'s IPCC says is likely;
- The causes of air pollution the PSR identifies do not match the examples they provide;
- The solutions the PSR offers are impractical and would not meaningfully reduce air pollution or improve human health.

Like other interest groups hoping to push costly climate policies, PSR first chooses what it believes is a compelling health narrative and then speculates that it might have a link to climate change. As the study they cite demonstrates, however, that link is nonexistent, or uncertain at best, and its own examples have no relation to the policy solutions it recommends.

Conclusion

Sound environmental policy can have real benefits that reduce impact on the environment and improve human health and our overall quality of life. Playing with numbers and ignoring massive uncertainty, however, results in policies that harm taxpayers while doing little for the environment. The phony claims made by Physicians for Social Responsibility are the latest example of using the veneer of science to hide what is really political excuse-making in an effort to gain public acceptance of a carbon tax.