



Presidential Climate Action Project

Climate Action Brief:

The Moral Case for Energy Efficiency

April 25, 2008

Gasoline prices are approaching \$4 a gallon and overall energy costs rose more than 8 percent during the first quarter of 2008.ⁱ That has put pressure on the American economy, damaging consumer confidence, forcing airlines into bankruptcy and affecting everything from the trucking industry to small-town police departments.

If there ever was any doubt, the bottom-line arguments should be obvious now for energy conservation and improving the efficiency of our vehicles, homes and businesses. But there are moral as well as financial reasons to do something about our profligate use of energy.

Global food prices have soared because of drought, population increases and changing economies – and because energy is competing with food for the world’s grain crops. America’s subsidization of corn ethanol is a contributing factor. Replacing \$100-a-barrel oil with \$3-a-bushel corn can have life-and-death consequences.

Five thousand people took to the streets in Johannesburg, South Africa in April to protest food prices that have jumped 14 percent in recent months.ⁱⁱ Violent demonstrations over the high cost of food have occurred in Senegal, Ivory Coast and across West Africa. Riots continued for more than a week in March in Haiti, and protests over the high cost of rice have exploded across Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

Aggravated by climate change, the food crisis may be a sign of things to come. Six years of drought across Australia -- believed to be caused by climate change – has nearly eradicated the country’s rice crop, which used to feed 20 million people across Asia. Production has dropped 98 percent as the drought has continued without relief, contributing to the doubling of the price of rice around the world in the last three months.ⁱⁱⁱ

In their report late last year, scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned of declining agricultural production in Australia, Asia and Latin America, and crop yields reduced by up to 50 percent by 2020 in Africa due to drought.

Other essential grains also are becoming more scarce and expensive as corn production increases. Wheat prices increased 120 percent in the past year. The price of maize – a staple across Africa – has doubled since 2006.

Which brings us back to energy. Twenty-five percent of the U.S. corn crop has been diverted to ethanol production to fill the tanks of vehicles that have the poorest average fuel efficiency ratings in the world. Light-duty vehicles in Europe average 50 percent higher gas mileage than their counterparts in the United States. The energy bill passed by Congress last December calls for light-duty vehicles in the U.S. to average 35 miles per gallon by 2020 – a goal that most of Europe, Japan and China have already surpassed.^{iv}

The Presidential Climate Action Project (PCAP) has called for these changes:

- America’s Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency standards should be raised to 50 miles per gallon by 2020 – about the mileage a Toyota Prius gets today -- and 200 miles per gallon by 2050. Advances in non-petroleum vehicles by mid-century will make this goal possible on a fleet-wide basis.
- The next President should challenge Americans to reduce vehicle miles traveled 20 percent by 2020 with greater investments in mass transit, smart growth, ride-sharing and other conservation options. An analysis for PCAP by the Center for Neighborhood Technology concludes that reducing miles traveled has more potential for cutting greenhouse gas emissions than new fuels and vehicle technologies.

We can make do with less energy consumption in transportation, but many in the world cannot make do with less food. Energy conservation is now an act of compassion.

This brief was prepared by the nonpartisan Presidential Climate Action Project at the University of Colorado Denver. PCAP, which is developing a 100-day climate action plan for the next President of the United States, issues briefs from time to time for the use of the presidential candidates as they consider policies to deal with climate change. Details are available at www.climateactionproject.com.

ⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics News, Consumer Price Index summary, April 16, 2008, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm>.

ⁱⁱ “South Africans March Over Food Prices,” BBC News, April 17, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ “A Drought in Australia, a Global Shortage of Rice,” by Keith Bradsher, The New York Times, April 17, 2008.

^{iv} Comparison of Passenger Vehicle Fuel Economy and Greenhouse Gas Emission Standards Around the World, by Feng An, Energy and Transportation Technologies L.L.C., and Amanda Sauer, World Resources Institute, for the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, December 2004. http://www.pewclimate.org/docUploads/Fuel%20Economy%20and%20GHG%20Standards_010605_110719.pdf