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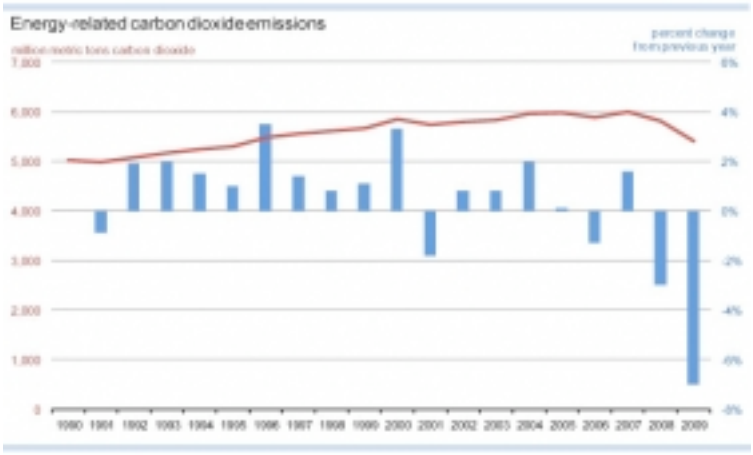
US Cut Its CO2 Emissions by 7 Percent Last Year



The world can be a thoroughly depressing place. It seems like bad news is all we ever get, like oil spills destroying wildlife, killer hurricanes, economic collapse, and terrorists with bombs in their underwear. However, bad news is not always so bad. It motivates us to act, to learn from our mistakes, and eventually become better for it. Good news does not teach us anything, except how much better good news feels than bad news. However, it offers a glimmer of hope, a reminder that hard work can actually show results. Yesterday, we received that good news from the Energy Information Administration (EIA), an independent federal statistics and analysis agency. They reported that the US achieved a record setting seven percent decline in CO2 emissions in 2009.

The seven percent decline is the largest absolute and percentage decline since the US EIA began keeping comprehensive records of yearly energy data in 1949. Carbon dioxide, for the few who don't know, is considered a greenhouse gas and one of the primary culprits of climate change. It is not toxic to humans at its normal concentration, we create it with every breath we take. However, as it accumulates in the atmosphere from our rampant combustion of fossil fuels, it has the potential to change the climate of the Earth. Lowering global production of CO2 is the primary long-term environmental goal of all civilized nations.

The decline is a good step for the United States, since this nation is the largest producer of such emissions. The many factors involved were analyzed in depth by the EIA. "The large decline in emissions was driven by the economic downturn, combined with an ongoing trend toward a less energy-intensive

economy and a decrease in the carbon-intensity of the energy supply," said EIA Administrator Richard Newell.

It seems this may the only bright side of the Great Recession. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by 2.4 percent in 2009, and much of that decrease was from cutbacks in energy-intensive industries. Output from these industries, such as primary metals (-33.9 percent) and nonmetallic minerals (-17.4 percent) fell faster than total industrial output (-9.8 percent).

Industries also focused a lot on conserving energy from an environmental and economic standpoint. Therefore, energy consumed per dollar of GDP also fell by 2.4 percent. This can be coupled with the ongoing "greening" trend, the switch from high-carbon energy fuels to cleaner renewables. The EIA reported that the carbon intensity of the energy supply (carbon dioxide per unit of energy consumed) declined by 2.3 percent. These two factors contributed to the overall drop in carbon intensity of the economy (CO2 per dollar of GDP) of more than 4.5 percent between 2008 and 2009.

Every sector of the economy experienced a decrease in carbon intensity. Cars have become more fuel efficient. Commercial offices and retail stores have made efforts to conserve energy to save money during the recession. Electric power generation has started to make meaningful investments in clean energy. The hope is that when the economy bounces back to normal and industrial operations pick up production, these trends won't backslide into oblivion. Energy saving efforts cannot be abandoned, they must be expanded.

Politically, the false choice will be put forward: economic recovery orenvironment. The smart politician will reject this choice and concentrate on the positive gains reported by the EIA.

The problem with good news is that it makes people complacent. Decision makers might say what a great job we have all done, now we can sit back and congratulate ourselves. This is the wrong attitude, because there is still much work to do. Worldwide, carbon dioxide emissions should continue to be cut in order to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Granted, the recession contributed to 3.5 percent of the decline and cutting jobs is not a good policy for cutting emissions. However, there was still a 4.5 percent decline from decreasing the carbon intensity of the economy and that is what can be built on. Let's see if America is up to the challenge.

Link to the EIA analysis

Link to the EIA emissions data which the analysis is based on