

Frozen by uncertainty

By Eric Olson/ Special To The Tab
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Global warming is upon us. Even the oil companies tell us so. BP, formerly known as British Petroleum but now officially just "BP" (after spreading the rumor they wanted to stand for "Beyond Petroleum") is running full-page ads in major newspapers encouraging people to take the time to calculate their carbon footprint. The only reason anyone would take the time is if they first believed there was some problem with their carbon footprint, i.e., specifically carbon dioxide, the heat-trapping gas formed whenever a fossil fuel is burned. Climate scientists have been fretting for a couple of decades now that our species' emissions of billions of tons of CO₂ per year could warm up the planet, and both their models and their observations point clearly now in that direction. So it is a great relief to see at least some of the major beneficiaries of our carbon-intensive economy are finally encouraging consumers to take note.

Let's say you do use the BP calculator or others like it to calculate your footprint. You provide information on your household heating and air conditioning, your electricity consumption, your mileage and miles driven, add in a plane trip or two, and don't forget the hot water heater. What did you get? Between 15 and 20 tons per year? Are you surprised that I guessed so close? It's not hard. Energy geeks all know that the typical American house generates just over 13 tons annually, and we just add in 5 to 10 additional tons for transportation. Plane travel is especially costly by this measure.

Now what? This is the question of the decade. There is a great deal of uncertainty about what if anything we can do on a personal level. Consider first the climate itself: This is an unpredictable beast and has changed over the millennia all on its own. There is a slim chance that it will either autocorrect (maybe more clouds will form and will block the sun) or an act of God will save us at least temporarily (ash from large volcanic eruptions also block the sun). A second rescue could come from our own ingenuity: Surely we will come up with something - a cheap fuel from our own garbage, cold fusion, vastly superior yet cheaper solar panels, etc. A third option is to turn to the government and shout, "Make everyone suffer equally! Only then will I accept sacrifice." Finally we could just be resigned to our fate. After all, maybe a warmer world won't be so bad, really. We could just ride it out and send food to the people suffering the worst consequences.

A hard-nosed economist, confronted with such uncertainty, might argue for a "wait but watch closely" approach. If you act too soon, goes this reasoning, you may regret it when some better option comes along. This sounds sensible, as does so much of what economists say, but in light of the stakes involved (many species threatened with extinction, 17% of the land area of Bangladesh to be lost with just a 1-meter rise in sea level, hurricane intensity in the Atlantic up sharply over the past 30 years), a better description of this response is "frozen by uncertainty". The deer-in-the-headlights image comes to mind.

A middle ground is to do SOMETHING, even if it's small. Like get yourself down to Swartz Hardware in Nonantum and check out their amazingly low prices on compact fluorescent bulbs (full disclosure: I have no financial interest in that store). This could be your Step One. Did you know that a single one of these twisty bulbs saves you over \$50 over its seven-year lifetime? Even if they still cost \$10 they would be worth it, but their cost is just a couple of bucks now, and the light quality has improved over that of earlier versions.

As for Step Two, how about that \$50 I just saved you, two lines back? Use that money to support new renewable, clean electricity generation in New England. There's an astonishing way to do this, and it gets your money multiplying all over the place. Here's how it works: The government has already imposed a tiny clean power charge on our utility bills. Look closely at your NStar bill and you'll see it. This money flows to an entity called the Renewable Energy Trust Fund, which is charged with encouraging new clean power (solar, wind, etc.) for the state. If you contribute \$50 to support clean power, the Trust fund will release an equivalent amount back to the City of Newton, and the City has committed to spending this money on educational solar panel displays on our public schools. (Oak Hill Middle School will be the first recipient, slated for this summer.) Then the Trust releases a second \$50 match, to support energy efficiency projects in low-income housing in the state, wherever the need is greatest. Finally, since this is a donation, you get a tax deduction for it, 100 percent of it. So you can support new clean power, help put solar panels on a school, make a low-income family a bit warmer next winter, get a tax deduction, and lo, it's free money to begin with, because you bought the bulb at Swartz. Would you like to buy a second bulb?

To get going on this and join the growing throng of people voting with their pocket books for renewable power, call the Mass Energy Consumers Alliance at 617-524-3950 ext. 129, and ask to speak with Janna Cohen-Rosenthal. You may want to do those other things - wait and watch closely, shout at the government, etc. - but the first step is to crack through your own frozen uncertainty and support clean energy. One lightbulb and one phone call at a time.

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