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T. M. Power

How Federal Agencies Hide from Their Impacts on Global Warming

The principle federal land management agencies in the West, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, are concerned about the impacts of global warming on the landscapes, wildlife, and fisheries under their care. They recognized that global warming will increase the frequency and intensity of wildfires. The warmer winter temperatures will also allow insect and other infestations to proliferate, weakening and killing more vegetation that will add fuel to the wildfires. The warming climate will also change the mix of snow and rain that falls across the year and the time pattern of water runoff, reducing mid- and late-summer stream flows and raising the temperature of the water, impacting our fisheries. The habitat for various species, including threatened and endangered species, will shrink and move across the landscape adding to the stresses already threatening them with extinction. The Forest Service is proud of the fact that its forests can act as carbon sinks, removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and helping stabilize climate.

While the Forest Service and BLM scientists wrestle with these disturbing impacts of climate change on the landscapes they manage, they also proceed to ignore the contribution the development of fossil fuel resources on their lands make to that climate change. In that sense the agencies are schizophrenic on climate change: They acknowledge that it is real and is caused, in important part, by human combustion of fossil fuels. Yet they deny that leasing huge blocks of coal to energy companies and

other activities to facilitate the expansion of fossil fuel production have any impact on global warming.

To maintain these contradictory positions, the federal agencies have had to engage in some convoluted word play to help them with their legal dodge ball game.

Consider one recent example in Montana where the BLM announced that it would be putting up 61 million tons of federally-owned coal for lease. Signal Peak Energy, who operates the Bull Mountain coal mine, has asked to lease that federal coal. That federal lease will actually open up an additional 72 million tons of adjacent private and state coal reserves for Signal Peak to mine for a total of 133 million tons of coal that will be mined and sent off to be burned at coal-fired electric generators.

Since the coal is only mined to be burned and the greenhouse gases associated with burning that coal are easily calculated, one would think that the implications of mining and burning this coal would be one of the subjects of the environmental analysis that supported the BLM's decision to open this coal to mining. That was not the case. The BLM baldly asserted that the "effects on global warming [associated with this mine] cannot be quantified."

The BLM explained its "logic" in the following terms. It admitted that greenhouse gas emissions, such as the carbon dioxide from the burning of coal, had a measureable impact on climate change that could be estimated. But, it said, and I am quoting "it is currently impossible to determine what effect any given amount of greenhouse gas emissions...might have on the phenomena of global warming or climate change...It is therefore not currently possible to associate any particular action with...any specific climate-related environmental effects...It is known that certain actions may contribute in

some way to the phenomenon (and therefore the effects of) climate change, even though specific climate-related environmental effects cannot be directly attributed to them.”¹

Say what!?! We know quantitatively that the burning of the coal contributes to global warming. We know what impact global warming is having on the lands under our management. But we cannot say exactly what burning this particular 133 million tons of coal will have at any particular location. For that reason we have to conclude that there is no environmental impact associated with mining and burning this coal.

This is the equivalent of saying that the substantial release of mercury from gold mining in Nevada, even though documented and the plume traced, cannot be associated with the undermining of any particular child’s mental capacity, therefore we have to assume that those mercury releases have no impacts. Or the equivalent of saying that a particular coal-fired plant that is belching out sulfur-dioxide and sulfate particulates cannot be shown to be causing acid rain on any particular acre of forest in the eastern United States or the acidification of any particular eastern mountain lake, or the respiratory disease of any particular person, therefore we have to conclude that that power plant’s pollution has zero environmental impacts.

This type of argument has the same scientific standing as the arguments made by tobacco and asbestos companies that there was no evidence that their products caused illness and premature death. It is a perversion of scientific knowledge to deny what is actually known and avoid even the first baby-steps to begin to take action to avoid the damage we know we are causing.

¹ Section 3.3.2.3 Climate Change Cause and Effect, p. 3-21, Bull Mountains Final Environmental Analysis, April, 2011, Bull Mountains Mine No. 1, Federal Coal Lease MTM 97988, Musselshell County, Montana, DOI-BLM-MT-CO10-2009-0010-EA.

This is not to say that it is obvious what the appropriate public policy measures are that should be taken right now. That is certainly debatable. But denying what you know is true in an official document that is intended to provide complete disclosure of environmental impacts is a public policy travesty. At least for starters, we should allow our scientists to tell the truth.