“The Accidental Activist” Now in the Walrus

Mark Jaccard

Mark Jaccard's article in the upcoming March issue of The Walrus is now available [http://thewalrus.ca/the-accidental-activist/]. The basic message is that energy-economy analysts can say with certainty that we cannot expand fossil fuel infrastructure and meet the 2º Celsius temperature change limit. This is because new oil and gas pipelines, refineries and fossil fuel burning power plants, and expanded oil sands plants and coal ports, will last decades. Once they are constructed, the economics change dramatically - because of what economists call sunk costs. As the article explains, we also know what each jurisdiction must do to start a global reduction in emissions: (1) pricing, capping or regulating carbon pollution - as Scandinavia and California are doing, (2) stopping all carbon polluting infrastructure investments, and (3) using trade measures to protect domestic industry from imports that have a cost advantage because they are produced in jurisdictions that lack (1) and (2). If anyone tells you we don't need to do these things, or that we can't, they are telling you that a climate disaster is inevitable or preferable to action. To get these policies, we are going to need to leave our comfort zones and engage in civil activism. Fortunately, there are many groups showing the way, starting with Bill McKibben's 350.org.
Ekaterina Rhodes, Ph.D. candidate, has recently completed two collaborative studies on B.C.’s climate policies. The study "A Tale of Two Climate Policies: Political-Economy of British Columbia’s Carbon Tax and Clean Electricity Standard" was conducted with her senior supervisor, Mark Jaccard, and will soon be published in the Canadian Public Policy Special Issue.

The study described and assessed B.C.’s carbon tax and clean electricity standard against the criteria of GHG emissions reductions, economic efficiency, administrative feasibility, and public acceptance. The authors found that the clean electricity standard reduces four to six times more emissions per year by 2020 than the carbon tax but at an average cost per tonne of CO₂ reduced that is significantly higher than the carbon tax at its current levels.

Interestingly, the clean electricity standard achieves higher and steadier levels of public acceptance, which might be attributed to its lack of visibility relative to the carbon tax.


In this study, the authors explored public and stakeholder perspectives on the current and future design of B.C.’s carbon tax. Public polling indicated that a growing majority of British Columbians think the carbon tax has been a positive step for the province. Interviews with 39 stakeholder groups showed that a significant majority of participants felt the net consequences of the revenue-neutral carbon tax were positive for B.C. Most agreed, however, that both the environmental and economic impacts were likely to be minimal at the current tax rate and evidence for either, if offered, was largely anecdotal. Most participants felt the rate should either continue to increase after 2012 or be maintained at the $30 per tonne level, reflecting a balance between the desire for B.C. to continue its efforts to reduce GHG emissions and concern about the risk of being placed at a competitive disadvantage. Participants supported applying a price to non-combustion sources of emissions from large industry, with many preferring carbon taxes to cap-and-trade. If revenue were to increase (through rate increases or a broader base), participants strongly favoured investing the additional revenue in projects that reduce emissions.
Often we fill this newsletter with the more “academic” activities of the EMRG team. But this is only part of “EMRG in action”. You will find EMRGers on the radio, making presentations to various committees and groups, participating in Expert Panels, and more. For a taste of this…

Oct 10, 2012: On behalf of Kairos, an ecumenical organization concerned with environmental, social, cultural and economic justice, Dr. John Nyboer questioned Enbridge spokespeople on Enbridge's support of the Copenhagen agreement, signed by Steven Harper, to limit average global temperatures to a maximum rise of 2° C and their role as corporate citizens in realizing this goal. An answer is still forthcoming; at least this is what Dr. Nyboer was told.


Nov 12, 2012: At the Behavior, Energy & Climate Change Conference in Sacramento, Dr. Jonn Axsen gave a presentation entitled, Will Electric Vehicle Buyers Want Green Electricity? His research in this area examined consumer interest in both plug-in electric vehicles and green electricity and the possibility that interest in these technologies is linked.

Nov 19, 2012: The Vancouver Jewish Community Centre hosted Jeff Rambharack for a talk on the link between the devastation of Hurricane Sandy and climate change as well as the role policy can play in mitigating future climate-related disasters.

Nov 28-29, 2012: A winter school was held by the Club of Rome and the Volkswagen Foundation on Limits to Growth Revisited and Jeremy Moorhouse was one of 61 students around the world chosen to attend. The participating students re-examined the findings of the famous 1972 book The Limits to Growth and considered whether these limits had already been passed. Dr. Mark Jaccard was also a keynote speaker at the event and delivered a presentation on, What happens if Fossil Energies are Depleted.

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Jan 13, 2013: At the annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board, Dr. Jonn Axsen delivered two presentations. The first, Hybrid, Plug-in Hybrid, or Electric: What Do Car Buyers Want? presented his findings on consumer vehicle preferences. The second, Do Plug-in Vehicle Buyers Want Green Electricity? Survey of U.S. New-Car Buyers explored the connection between vehicle and electricity demands.

Jan 28, 2013: Dr. John Nyboer attended the first of 5 Expert Panel meetings with the Council of Canadian Academies. This non profit organization researches issues on behalf of various levels of government. The issue to be addressed in this analysis is “Canadian Industry’s Competitiveness in Terms Energy Prices”.

Jan 31, 2013: Maxwell Sykes addressed the Joint Review Panel for the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline project. His address emphasized that this project is about more than the pipeline itself and that climate change, though not formally considered in the process, is a critically important environmental dimension of this project.

Feb 21, 2013: As part of a special President’s Dream Colloquium series on Justice Beyond National Boundaries, Dr. Mark Jaccard gave a lecture on Global Warming – Global Justice: Trade-Off or Win-Win? In his lecture he discussed why we have not reached a global treaty on climate change, what one might look like, and the implications of global warming on global justice.

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