American leadership beyond the climate summit: Column

Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang

As a United Nations summit seeks to energize the fight against global warming, the United States must lead by example if the world is going to cut heat-trapping greenhouse gases.

Although some may think the nation is making no progress, it is undertaking a surprising number of measures at the federal, state, and local levels that will take a significant bite out of carbon dioxide emissions. To slow the race to the precipice, the challenge is to adopt them widely and implement them fully.

The savings can be eye-popping. At the federal level alone, the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy estimates, full implementation of existing and pending rules governing cars, power plants, appliances and housing could net the United States $2.6 trillion through 2040 and cut 34 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide. That is the equivalent of eliminating more than six years of U.S. fossil fuel use.

Every level of American society — from individuals to the federal government, from college campuses to corporations — must act. By screwing in LED light bulbs and driving more efficient automobiles, we can begin to reduce pollution, save money by cutting energy waste, and become a global warming beacon around the world, a highly efficient one at that.

Down-to-earth solutions take advantage of technology that is largely available today, and federal rules and tax credits encourage consumers to buy clean products.

The United States has already taken the biggest single step of any nation to fight global warming: The tough auto mileage-and-emissions standards that are President Obama's signature effort to fight climate change will keep 6 billion tons of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and deliver a new car fleet in 2025 that averages 54.5 mpg.

Next? Administration officials are preparing rules to reduce power plants' reliance on coal, the key step in cleaning up utilities. They should be stronger than the levels the president's staff is considering, akin in stringency to the car rules.
Yes, roughly one-half of the U.S. House of Representatives denies the science of global warming. But even in some of the nation's most conservative quarters, states have set standards requiring utilities to generate a percentage of electricity from such renewable, non-polluting sources as the wind and sun. In April, the Kansas House of Representatives blocked an effort to repeal a requirement that 20% of the state's electricity come from renewable sources by 2020.

Next? All levels of government -- states, cities, and towns -- should replace most gas guzzlers in their official fleets with efficient hybrid and electric cars, saving money over the life of the fleet and cutting carbon emissions on the road. They should retrofit public buildings with efficient lighting, heating and cooling systems, greater insulation and solar panels.

Industry must invest in improved efficiency, and increase the use of renewable energy to slash emissions — think of solar panels on warehouse roofs — while avoiding such highly polluting fuels as carbon-intensive tar sands oil.

Public officials and the private sector should take advantage of smart financing provisions that allow efficient technology's energy savings to pay for improvements that lower long-term energy bills. At no cost to the local treasury, Naugatuck, Conn, made $12 million in improvements to school boilers, air conditioning controls and efficient lighting, among other measures, and cut its energy bills. Money that would have gone to higher utility bills instead paid for the improvements.

Universities and pension funds should drop fossil fuel companies from their investment portfolios, to send a message of responsible action and to create financial incentives for energy companies to switch to renewable fuels.

Individuals can do their part and save money at the same time, taking advantage of the fruits of federal efficiency standards: Cleaner cars and efficient washing machines, furnaces and air conditioning units. They can minimize car trips around town, and turn off computers that aren't being used.

As former New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, former Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson Jr. and Tom Steyer, a retired hedge fund founder and manager—economic experts all—argued in their report, "Risky Business," fighting global warming makes sense, too, on a large economic scale.

Noting the "significant and diverse economic risks" the United States faces from climate change, they wrote: "Damages from storms, flooding, and heat waves are already costing local economies billions of dollars."

The United States, the world's wealthiest nation, has poisoned the atmosphere with the most greenhouse gas and still spews more than any nation except China.

We have the responsibility, resources and technology to lead the world in preventing severe global warming. We must act as if the world depends on it. Because it does.
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