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The Clean Power Plan

by Syed Habibullah

(Chemistry 1551)

I. What is it?

The Clean Power Plan was an environmental law introduced by the Obama administration and EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) on August 15th, 2015. A plan introduced in the United States in order to meet the Paris climate accord obligations. The plan was designed to reduce the amount of fossil fuels emitted by power plants in order to ultimately limit the effects of climate change. The idea here is to shift from fossil fuels such as coal, to more cleaner and lower-polluting sources of energy. With CO₂ accounting for a majority of the pollution in the United States, the plan called for a 32% reduction (from 2005 levels) in CO₂ pollution by 2030. Enforced pollution cuts to meet that percentage reduction were scheduled to begin in 2022. By 2030, cuts were expected to become even more rigorous. The EPA even predicted that by 2030 carbon pollution would decrease by over 870 million tons. Economists also predicted that by 2030 the country would save over \$20 billion in terms of climate change expenses, save upwards of \$34 billion in healthcare costs, and would even save the average American family around \$85 on their electric bills. Not only that, but the United States would potentially save billions with the absence of natural disasters. The likelihood of a natural disaster decreases significantly with a healthier atmosphere spared from CO₂ pollution. In fact, in 2012, federal spending on natural disasters rose to nearly \$100 billion, which is more money than the government spent on education and transportation that year.

The Clean Power Plan fell under the EPA's existing Clean Air Act, which allowed the EPA to legally control CO₂ pollution on fossil fueled power plants nationwide. The plan set a national limit for the amount of pollution produced by existing fossil fueled power plants. Although this limit was in place for the entire nation, individual states did have the opportunity to choose their own plans. States not only had the ability to construct their own plan but also were allowed to choose how much they would limit state emissions by. Even if states didn't opt in for a plan, the Clean Air Act ensured that the government would limit state pollution directly if needed.

Allowing states to design their own plan also would allow the power grid to remain strong, where states would be required to consider grid reliability (to ensure a dependable electricity service) while also limiting pollution. In addition to that, the Clean Power Plan implemented safety precautions in case of emergency situations. In case of such situation, states are given a more lenient emission limit, allowing power plants to emit more pollutants than the emission limit allows for (up to 90 days).

Although the future seemed bright environmentally in the United States, the Clean Power Plan never got to see the day of light, being repealed just two years later by the Trump administration in October 2017.

II. What are the benefits of The Clean Power Plan (arguments made for it)?

The biggest and simplest argument to make with a plan like this is the fact that it's aimed at reducing CO₂, which provides a multitude of benefits. In 2017, over 1,207 million tons of CO₂ were emitted into the atmosphere according to the EPA. That figure is only 69% of all gasses, the U.S. in 2017 emitted over 1,740 million tons of harmful gasses into the atmosphere. The idea of the Clean Power Plan is to forgo all these harmful gasses and replace them with more cleaner sources such as solar panels, fuel cells, wind power, etc. Building upon this idea, people argue further that limiting greenhouse gas emissions would not only make our air cleaner, but it would also help fight issues of

global warming and climate change. By 2030, the EPA estimated that the Clean Power Plan would reduce smog by 25%.

Easily the biggest issue with CO₂ emission is global warming. It's no secret that the Earth is warming up. Since the late 19th century, the Earth's surface temperature has risen by almost 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit (0.9 degrees Celsius). In addition to that, ocean levels have seen a temperature boost of 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit since 1969. On top of that sea levels have risen nearly 8 inches in the last century due to shrinking ice sheets. Arctic ice sheets have continued to deplete in the last few decades and the rise in extreme weather events has continued to grow. Reducing CO₂ emissions would not only help prevent these harmful effects but would also help reverse some of them.

Looking at the possibilities from a health perspective, a cleaner atmosphere provided by the Clean Power Plan would not only reduce exposure to pollution but would also save thousands of lives. Climate change has already raised many health risks in itself as a result of CO₂ emission. Due to increased drought, agriculture production been affected which has caused increased famine, higher food prices, and allergy seasons. According to the EPA, reducing exposure to pollution would prevent up to 3,600 premature deaths, 90,000 asthma attacks in children, and up to 1,700 heart attacks. Not only that, but families would see up to \$4 in health benefits each year. The Clean Power Plan is also estimated to provide between \$55 to \$93 billion in public health benefits by 2030.

From an economic standpoint, the Clean Power Plan once again proves how valuable it is. There are benefits for all people in the United States. According to the EPA, the Clean Power Plan is estimated to reduce monthly electric bills by \$7. That's a big deal for families when you consider the amount of money that could be saved per year. Now what about the electricity we pay for? Believe it or not the United States spends an absurd amount on coal each year, totaling more than \$500 million. Replacing coal with a cleaner source would save the United States a fortune each year. In addition to that, thousands of new jobs would be created across the United States. An increase in demand for renewable energy with the Clean Power Plan would give rise to new industries such as the wind and solar industries.

III. What are the downsides of The Clean Power Plan (arguments against it)?

Although the Clean Power Plan once had brought hope to the environment in the United States, it never quite got off its feet. After suffering for two years with legal trouble, the plan was repealed in fall 2017. One argument that arose was the 'war on coal' coined by the Trump administration. President Trump believes the Clean Power Plan would kill off the coal industry due to its proposal to move away from fossil fuels. Along with that, President Trump believes it would harm the economy due to the amount of money and jobs that would be lost as a result of killing the coal industry.

Outside the coal industry, some go further as to argue that the Clean Power Plan will simply harm the economy all around. They cite that the hefty regulations proposed by the Clean Power Plan would result in larger electricity bills, resulting in consumer demand to decrease. Due to that decrease in consumer demand, people believe energy companies will begin to drop workers and lower investment. Beyond that, some simply believe that the Clean Power Plan would provide little to no benefits to climate change and global warming. They cite that CO₂ emissions are already on their way down due to a shift towards sources such as natural gas. In addition to that they say that even if the United States drastically reduces its CO₂ emissions, it will barely put a dent in the global temperature. People further argue that even if global temperature decreases, it won't be enough to counteract climate change. Storms, droughts, floods, they will all still be relevant regardless whether or not CO₂ emissions are decreased.

The biggest argument against the Clean Power Plan is made by U.S. states. It is believed that the Clean Power Plan took power above the states when it comes to limiting CO₂ emissions. People argue that the Clean Power Plan should've given more power to the states. This is because the plan offered its own plans to each state instead of allowing states to freely decide how they wanted limit

CO₂ emission. In addition to that, the Clean Power Plan's options were very limiting and didn't take into account each state's situation. Since each state has its own electricity resources, technology, costs, etc., people argue that each state should be allowed to freely decide how they want to limit their CO₂.

IV. What are your thoughts?

I personally believe the Clean Power Plan was a good idea judging by the benefits it promised to bring. Its main purpose is to fight back CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels. However, industries such as the coal industry are already declining. This is not directly because of regulation, but more so because more cleaner sources are already on the rise. The argument made toward the Clean Power Plan regarding its harmful impact on the coal industry does make a point. However, what it's missing is the fact that the fall of the coal industry will bring rise to newer, more favorable energy industries. As I mentioned, the coal industry is already declining, it's already on its way out the door. Yes, if the coal industry is omitted, then that will inevitably kill off thousands of jobs. However, those jobs would easily transfer over to rising industries such as the wind power industry. The goal of the Clean Power Plan is to almost captivate fossil fuel industries and force them work under their regulation. But to me it seems more so that these energy industries are already regulating themselves, in the sense that change is occurring within the industries on its own (i.e. coal industry falling to natural gas industry). Not to the extent to where CO₂ emissions are rapidly dropping (as proposed by the Clean Power Plan), however the United States is already reducing CO₂ emissions. We're already improving our emission habits; the Clean Power Plan just takes that a step further. The only problem I found with the Clean Power Plan is that it didn't exactly address transportation and its impact on CO₂ emissions. Motorized vehicles easily have to be the biggest contributors to the greenhouse gas problem. There are millions of cars on the road each day, their impact on the atmosphere around is definitely is larger than that of a power plant. Although vehicle manufacturers are taking it upon themselves to offer electric or even fuel cell vehicles, they haven't attracted many buyers to really make a difference.

What would I do from here? Well, it's nearly 2019 now and the Clean Power Plan has already been repealed. It's promises definitely intrigued me as well as many other Americans. Everyone dreams of a future free of greenhouse gas harm, a future where the energy we use to power our lives doesn't negatively affect our health and wellbeing. I believe a big problem with the Clean Power Plan was the fact that it hadn't sat well with U.S. states, with complications on how regulation would go. If I were the EPA, I would allow states to regulate themselves in that they choose how they want to limit their power plants and what they want to do with the industries in their states. I would restrict every state to a certain amount of CO₂ emitted (not an amount which would seem outlandish). Other than that, states choose what they want to do and how they want to meet that restriction. Like the Paris Climate Agreement, which requires enrolled countries to stay within a certain temperature increase by decreasing CO₂ emission. As time goes on, I'd slowly decrease that allowed emission amount, eventually leading fossil fuel industries to collapse in favor of cleaner energy industries. Another thing is I'd address CO₂ emission from transportation vehicles, it's quite odd that power plants were targeted and not vehicles. In recent years, the government has mandated things such as rear-view cameras, safety systems, trunk safety latches, etc. I believe the next step is omitting gasoline ran vehicles. As more manufacturers continue to roll out electric vehicles, the next big move is replacing all gasoline ran vehicles on the road with electric ones. This is not a process which could take a few years, this is a process which could take a decade or two. Manufacturers are doing their part in fighting off CO₂ emissions, I believe it's the government's time to soon step in.

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