VIEWPOINT

12-step plan for climate action

BY ALISA GRAVITZ

With the movie "An Inconvenient Truth" drawing record audiences, and groups as diverse as the Evangelical Climate Initiative and the Pentagon sounding the alarm on the coming climate catastrophe, our country could be on the cusp of taking real action on a very real danger.

But how large a scale of action for a solution is needed to match the enormous scale of the problem? Based on the data -- such as rapidly melting polar icecaps -- showing that climate change is happening faster than anyone thought, it is increasingly clear: Baby steps won't do it.

We need a bold proposal that can beef up corporate, government, community, and household plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions - especially carbon emissions -- to lower levels we can live with.

Scientists at the Princeton's Carbon Mitigation Initiative (CMI) have taken up this challenge, and propose stabilizing carbon emissions by dividing this huge task into smaller, doable action "wedges" of equal size-each with the capacity to reduce those emissions by 1 billion tons per year by 2054. CMI lists 15 possible "wedges," out of which we need to achieve just seven to reach equilibrium.

At my organization, Co-op America, we added our own filters to this building-block approach. We screened out measures that are too dangerous, costly, and slow (like nuclear power plants, synfuels, and "clean" coal), and we beefed up those that are safe and cost-effective. (Wind energy is cost-competitive at utility scale, and has beaten natural gas in certain markets. Solar energy will be cost-competitive within five years.)

With these filters, we developed a plan that uses current technologies; is safe, clean, and cost-effective; and is big enough to meet the climate challenge-12 "wedges" when we only need seven. Each of the following could reduce dreaded emissions by at least 1 billion tons per year by 2054:

Here's our 12-step scheme:

1. Increase fuel economy for the world's 2 billion cars from an average of 30 mpg to 60 mpg.
2. Cut back on driving. Decrease car travel for 2 billion 30-mpg cars from 10,000 to 5,000 miles per year, through increased use of mass transit, telecommuting, walking and biking.
3. Increase energy efficiency by one-quarter in existing buildings and appliances. Move to zero-emissions plans for new buildings.
4. Decrease tropical deforestation to zero, and double the rate of new tree plantings.
5. Stop soil erosion. Apply "conservation tillage" techniques to cropland at 10 times the current usage. Encourage local, organic agriculture.
6. Increase wind power. Add 3 million 1-megawatt windmills, 75 times the current capacity.
7. Expand solar power. Add 3,000 gigawatt-peak solar photovoltaic units, 1,000 times current capacity.
8. Increase efficiency of coal plants from an average of 32 percent efficiency to 60 percent, and shut down plants that don't meet the standard. No net new coal plants, for new plants built, an equal number should close.
9. Replace 1,400 gigawatts of coal with natural gas, a four-fold increase in natural gas usage over current levels-a short-term step until zero-emissions renewable technologies can replace natural gas.
10. Sequester CO2 at existing coal plants. Sequestration involves storing carbon dioxide underground, an unproven technology that may, nonetheless, be better than nothing.
11. Develop zero-emissions vehicles, including plug-in hybrids and electric vehicles powered by renewable energy.
12. Develop biomass as a short-term replacement for fossil fuel until better carbon-free technologies are developed -- but only biofuels made from waste, and made without displacing farmland and rainforests.

This framework can help us think big and fast enough to avoid the worst consequences of climate change. If we are to achieve each wedge by 2054, the next 10 years must see major action. Anything less and we're kidding ourselves.

The good news? We can do this. We have the technologies and the know-how. We can take many of these steps today, on our own. For the rest, we need to persuade our elected officials, contact our power companies and auto manufacturers, and demand action from those with decision-making power. The best news? Beating climate change opens the door to more jobs, energy security, progress against poverty, a cleaner environment, and a safer world -- a better future for all of us.

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Alisa Gravitz is the executive director of Co-op America, a nonprofit consumer organization advocating socially and environmentally responsible purchasing www.coopamerica.org <http://www.coopamerica.org>.

Please pass the stuffing and the pesticides

BY MARGARET MELLON

The turkeys on our Thanksgiving tables this year are different from the ones the Pilgrims had. But Americans can, if they want, still buy local or organic birds that are closer in kind to the wild ones the Pilgrims ate, and more in tune with a holiday that encourages us to be grateful for the world around us.

The first settlers probably traveled only a short distance to hunt wild turkeys for their feast. Now, nearly all of the 50 million birds Americans will eat on Thursday will come from animal factories, most of which are far away from people's homes. Raising turkeys in a factory setting might make the birds cheaper and available to a large number of consumers. But such farming comes with negative consequences for our health and our environment.

Animal factories are large, concentrated operations with centralized processing and shipping operations. Their rise means that today, the average piece of food has to travel 1,500 miles to go from farm to supermarket. Truck pollution from shipping produce and meat contributes to poor air quality and global warming. Keeping meat products like turkeys refrigerated or frozen while in transit usesadditional energy.

Buying a turkey from closer to home, on the other hand, can ensure that your Thanksgiving meal is helping make the air a little cleaner. And local turkeys from a nearby farm or farmers' market are often fresher than what you can find in a grocery store. Buying local turkeys also helps support local people and their businesses, instead of faraway food corporations.

Another reason to avoid factory turkeys is that unlike the wild birds of old, these need constant doses of antibiotics to stay healthy. Factory animals live closely packed in unsanitary conditions. Owners use antibiotics to fight off infections and to make the animals gain weight.

Unfortunately, the antibiotics also make the bacteria that survive in factory farms even stronger. These drug-resistant bacteria have migrated out of the factory and make it harder for doctors to treat our own infections.

To avoid turkeys that have been raised on antibiotics, you can buy a bird at the supermarket with a USDA-certified "organic" label. To earn that organic seal from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, they must be grown without antibiotics. In addition, other organic foods like fruits and vegetables must be grown without synthetic fertilizers or toxic pesticides.

Alternatives to factory-produced turkeys at Thanksgiving could also give you a chance to try something new. Of the 250 million turkeys sold in the United States every year, 99 percent are the Broad-Breasted White variety. Animal factories reduce the choices consumers have. Because factory farming relies on a small number of breeds, they risk catastrophic losses if disease spreads in just one population of plants or animals. An alternative option is to purchase a "heritage" turkey from a local farm, some of which are descended from turkeys settlers brought to the American colonies. A heritage turkey can bring something unusual to your dinner table and bring more diversity to America's poultry population.

In addition to the turkeys Americans will eat this Thanksgiving, the string beans, apple pies, cranberry sauce, and other fixings can all be made with organic, locally grown ingredients.

If we are what we eat, then our food should reflect our values. Buying local and organic food fits in well with the Thanksgiving spirit of community and togetherness that the holiday evokes. A local, organic, or heritage turkey could make your Thanksgiving much more like the first one.

After all, nobody ate a factory bird there.

Margaret Mellon is the director of the Union of Concerned Scientists' (UCS') Food and Environment Program. Formed in 1969, UCS is the leading science-based nonprofit organization working for a healthy environment and a safer world. www.ucs.org

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