Photo by Uwe Hermann

The EPA and December 7th—A date that will live in infamy

By Steve Goreham

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December 7, 2009 is a date that will live in infamy. Not in memory of the attack on Pearl Harbor, but the day the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declared carbon dioxide to be a pollutant under the Clean Air Act.

The 52-page EPA Endangerment Finding can be summarized simply. The agency concluded that carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases emitted by US industry and vehicles were causing dangerous global warming. The EPA stated that these gases "…threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations." The agency relied on studies by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations, the U.S. Global Climate Research Program, and the National Research Council.

That ruling is bizarre. Carbon dioxide is not a pollutant. It is an invisible, odorless, harmless gas. It does not cause smoke or smog. The rising visible plumes from the smokestacks of a power plant are not CO2. That's condensing water vapor. We can't see carbon dioxide.

The EPA ruling failed to include nature's largest greenhouse gas, water vapor. Scientists estimate that 75 percent to 90 percent of Earth's greenhouse effect is due to water vapor and clouds. As any eighth-grade chemistry student learns, burning hydrocarbon fuel produces both carbon dioxide and water vapor. When natural gas (methane) is burned, two water vapor molecules are produced for each carbon dioxide molecule. Since water vapor is a greenhouse gas produced by human industry, the EPA should declare water a pollutant by its own logic.

Rather than being a pollutant, CO2 is green! Carbon dioxide is plant food, a compound essential for plant photosynthesis. Hundreds of peer-reviewed studies show that higher levels of atmospheric CO2 cause plants to grow faster and larger. Wheat, orange trees, pine trees, hardwood trees, prairie grasses, and even poison ivy thrive in higher levels of CO2.

Plants grow larger root systems, produce more seeds and vegetables, and bloom larger flowers with more CO2. Tree wood density increases. Plants grow better in poor soil and drought conditions with higher levels of atmospheric CO2. In fact, if we wanted to put one compound into the atmosphere that would be great for the biosphere, carbon dioxide is that compound. Yet, almost every university and company now tracks the size of its "carbon footprint" and tries to reduce carbon emissions.

But isn't it true that too much of anything can be bad for the environment? Yes in the case of real pollutants such as carbon monoxide or lead, but carbon dioxide is a harmless compound that is common in nature. The 2007 IPCC Carbon Cycle Model estimated that the atmosphere contained 750 billion tons of carbon in the form of CO2 with an additional 38,000 billion tons of carbon dissolved in the oceans. Mankind adds a comparably small 6 billion tons of carbon to the atmosphere each year.

The current atmospheric level of 394 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide is actually somewhat on the low side. Dr. William Happer of Princeton University points out that atmospheric CO2 reached several thousand ppm in past ages. Geological evidence shows that life flourished during those past times of high CO2.

Over 190 nations are currently gathered in Doha, Qatar, attempting to negotiate a global treaty to restrict carbon dioxide emissions. Future generations will regard the early 20th century as an age of climate foolishness.

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