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## Lee Terry: It's time to clear air on emissions, climate

BY LEE TERRY

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*The writer represents Nebraska's 2nd Congressional District and is a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.*

The middle of winter is perhaps not the most opportune time to talk about global warming. But that did not stop Al Gore, who recently repeated his dire predictions about climate change.

At a recent forum in New York City, the former vice president called President Bush a "moral coward" for not doing more to toughen clean air rules and reduce emissions from automobiles and electric utilities. While that made for some catchy rhetoric, it would have been nice to hear more substance and sound science.

The past few decades have seen great progress in climate research. Yet most scientists say it is still unclear how large a role humans play in global temperature change. Experts have told Congress that the Earth's climate has varied continuously throughout the ages. Variations in the sun's output, solar cycles and the Earth's magnetic field all appear to have influenced climate in the past.

This makes sense. After all, the Earth has been both much warmer and much cooler than it is today. Nebraska itself was once a tropical, forested region - only to be covered later by glaciers and woolly mammoths. These changes came long before power plants and SUVs, suggesting that Mother Nature fuels most climate change.

We do know, however, that certain human actions produce harmful effects. And there are immediate steps we can and should take to improve our air and environment. First, we must acknowledge that our air is cleaner today than at any time in the past 30 years. An EPA report issued last summer shows that emissions of the six principal air pollutants have been reduced 25 percent in the past three decades. All of Nebraska meets the nation's air quality standards.

While Gore derides voluntary emissions agreements between industry and government, these programs eliminated an estimated 237 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in the year 2000. That is more than four times the goal set by the federal government in 1993, when Gore was vice president.

But, as I said, we can do better.

The administration has worked with Congress to craft the Clear Skies initiative (H.R. 999), a science-based plan to cut today's levels of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and mercury by 70 percent by 2020. Elected officials from Omaha, Bellevue, Elkhorn and Ralston have written me in support of this plan.

The EPA predicts that under the Clear Skies Act, Nebraska would see health benefits worth \$530 million. Sulfur, mercury and nitrogen deposits would decrease substantially.

Some on Capitol Hill want more far-reaching legislation that would go beyond Clear Skies to radically reduce carbon dioxide, something they say is necessary to halt global warming. What the supporters of these drastic plans do not mention are the costs that would be passed on to families and consumers - despite the likelihood they would produce no noticeable benefits.

One of the extreme bills (H.R. 2042/S. 366), introduced by Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., and Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., would increase consumer electricity prices 33 percent by 2020, according to the American Enterprise Institute. The Waxman bill would reduce coal-fired generation by 55 percent, which would have severe economic consequences for the Omaha area, since 64 percent of OPPD's generation comes from coal.

If Waxman's emission limits were implemented, it is predicted that the U.S. gross domestic product would decline nearly \$100 billion. Yet, according to climate models, the Waxman-Jeffords bill would avert only 13/1,000ths of a degree of warming by 2100, hardly worth the huge hit to our economy.

The Clear Skies plan makes more sense, significantly improving air quality without punishing U.S. families. But in the

meantime, we can do even more.

The comprehensive energy bill (H.R. 6) - already approved by the House and awaiting Senate approval - contains more than \$7.5 billion in incentives to encourage the use of the latest pollution control equipment, as well as to help energy companies adopt cutting-edge clean-coal and carbon-sequestration technology.

The energy bill would reauthorize emissions-cutting renewable energy programs (such as the wind-energy-production credit). It would encourage the purchase of energy-efficient appliances and building materials, due to a provision I helped author.

Finally, the energy bill would expand the use of emissions-free nuclear power, encourage more production of clean-burning natural gas and create a 5-billion-gallon renewable fuel standard to double the amount of environmentally friendly ethanol and biodiesel fuel used in the United States. This is especially important considering that transportation sources are responsible for 60 percent of air pollution.

Despite the extraordinary complexities of global warming and clean air issues, we must work to lessen the political divide. We all want a cleaner environment. We all want to ensure the well-being of our planet.

While there are legitimate environmental concerns, there are also common-sense solutions. Instead of resorting to name-calling, a better approach lies in building consensus so that we can make progress on these important matters.

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