

Resolving Four Truths on Energy

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In his State of the Union message, President Obama touched on three themes that relate to energy. But added together, did they really provide a roadmap to a much-needed comprehensive energy policy? To me, they did not – which was disappointing. Instead he pointed to several truths that are contradictory and deserve resolution.

Early on, he revealed energy Truth #1: America depends on fossil fuels for its energy. While acknowledging advances in wind and solar power, the President proudly proclaimed that: “America is number one in oil and gas”. To much applause, he stated “thanks to lower gas prices and higher fuel standards, the typical family this year should save \$750 at the pump”.

According to data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), fossil fuels - including coal, oil, and natural gas - account for 82% of our total energy consumption. And EIA predicts that proportion will decrease by only 2% by 2040. We eagerly use fossil fuels because they are reliable, cheap, burn cleanly, and are packed with energy. The downsides of fossil fuels, including pollution caused by its extraction and combustion, are invisible to most people. So it is no surprise that we cheer and consume more when the price of gas goes down.

Later, the President revealed energy Truth #2: “No challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.” According to NASA research, global temperatures have risen 1.4°F since 1880. Ten of the warmest years measured since 1900 have occurred after 2000. That trend correlates with increases in carbon dioxide concentrations caused by burning fossil fuels. Climate change, as noted by the President, presents threats, including heat waves, droughts and floods, future migration and conflict. Those threats are taken seriously by ostensibly conservative organizations like the insurance industry and military.

During his address, the President revealed energy Truth #3: we have infrastructure problems that put our country at economic risk. Getting energy from one place to another – be it oil, coal, natural gas, or electricity – requires pipelines, rail lines, highways, and high-capacity power lines. Those corridors necessarily extend for hundreds or thousands of miles – from sources to consumers. But in many ways, that infrastructure is inadequate. So with a nod to the highly contentious Keystone XL pipeline, he stated: “So let’s set our sights higher than a single oil pipeline. Let’s

pass a bipartisan infrastructure plan that could create more than thirty times as many jobs per year, and make this country stronger for decades to come.”

Unfortunately, the President did not acknowledge that infrastructure has its risks and adverse impacts – which can be viewed as energy Truth #4. Power lines and natural gas pipelines present health and safety issues. All infrastructure corridors fragment valuable habitat, crossing sensitive ecosystems like wetlands and dissecting forests that support valued wildlife species. In response, groups are forming to oppose new infrastructure when it is in their backyards. In northeastern Pennsylvania, we see people coming together to bitterly protest gas pipelines in Luzerne County and power lines in the Poconos.

Taken together these truths collide, and we must find ways to resolve them. To his credit, the President noted the efforts of his administration to reduce carbon emissions in the US, and develop agreements with China to get them to do the same. But are those efforts enough? If we are really concerned about climate change, we must identify strategies to drastically curtail our use of fossil fuels. Regrettably, divisive debates over the reality and impacts of climate change, and the effectiveness of existing carbon-free alternatives have prevented us from identifying and implementing solutions. So unless some cheap, reliable carbon-free alternative emerges, or the downsides of extracting and burning fossil fuels become impossible to ignore or deny, we will continue to guzzle fossil fuels and climate change will get worse.

Likewise, efforts to improve our infrastructure are necessary if we want to live in a well-functioning society with safe, economical, and reliable transportation and energy networks. But those efforts often fail to acknowledge opposition by locals – concerned about their own health, safety, and the environment – who often seize upon the single-minded goal of stopping that infrastructure development. So one can anticipate additional conflicts to emerge unless we find ways to accommodate the needs to develop infrastructure and the concerns of locals worried about adverse impacts.

Clearly, we need a national plan to resolve these contradictory truths and productively move us ahead on energy-related issues. While the President regrettably did not explicitly offer any such plan during his address, his theme that America is a tight-knit family did hint to a path forward. We are all in this together, and must debate these vitally important issues rationally and respectfully.