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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Brown, Donald A.
Publisher	Rock Ethics Institute, The Pennsylvania State University
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Download date	2026-07-09 17:37:34
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/175509

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Local and Regional Governments' Ethical Responsibility to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions: the Case of Pennsylvania

By DONALD A BROWN on April 21, 2008 4:18 AM | [0 Comments](#) | [0 TrackBacks](#)

I. Introduction

The nations of the world have express responsibility under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the basis of **equity** to prevent dangerous interference with the climate system. For this reason among others, as stated in an earlier post, no nation can deny its responsibility to reduce emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions (See: *Nations Must Follow Climate Change Justice*, [Climateethics.org](http://climateethics.org/?p=20), <http://climateethics.org/?p=20>)

This post reviews the responsibility of state, regional, and local governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and looks at one US state, Pennsylvania, as a case study to examine these issues. Unlike many other US states, Pennsylvania has no climate change strategy. This post will make the claim that this is a moral and ethical failure even though Pennsylvania is taking some steps toward improving its energy mix in regard to greenhouse gas emissions. If a case can be made that Pennsylvania is failing to live up to its ethical responsibilities, stronger cases can be made about other US states and regional and local governments.

In the film, *Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore says three times that climate change is a moral problem but does not say what kind of moral problem it is or what makes global warming a moral problem. Climate change is a clear moral problem for three reasons. One, people in one part of the world can hurt people and plants, animals, and ecosystems in other parts of the world by emitting more than their fair share of safe global greenhouse gas emissions. Two, those who are most vulnerable to climate change are some of the poorest people in the world that have had nothing to do with causing the problem. And three, unchecked climate change has potentially catastrophic consequences in the form of increased droughts, floods, sea level rise, deaths from heat waves and vector borne disease, increases in the intensity of storms, and decreases in agricultural capacity.

II. Why state, regional governments have ethical responsibilities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions

Governments at all scales that have authority to reduce emissions within their jurisdiction to their fair share of safe global emissions have a duty to do so. Especially since state and local governments in the United States have authority to reduce some emissions that the federal government does not have. For example, state and local governments, and not the US federal government, regulate electric utilities, make decisions about transportation and roads, completely determine land use, and are responsible for building codes. Governments at lower scales have responsibility to exercise their authority to limit greenhouse gas emissions to their fair share of global climate changing emissions. The responsibility to act comes from the ability to prevent harm to others and the undeniable fact that emissions from activities they regulate are now well beyond any conceivable claim that they are emitting less than their fair share.

The responsibility to prevent harm is particularly strong if a case can be made that climate change triggers human rights violations (the subject of an upcoming post). Under human rights theory, all those who have the power to prevent violations of human rights held by others have a clear duty to assure enjoyment of these rights by others. Holders of human rights may not need to plead for their recognition; they are entitled to enjoy those rights without having to advocate or petition for them.

For these reasons, governments that have the ability to assure that unfair levels of greenhouse gas emissions from their jurisdiction do not hurt others have an ethical duty to achieve that potential.

Of course, what is a local or regional government's fair share is, is a complex ethical matter beyond the scope of this post and a matter about which different ethical theories could lead to



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different conclusions. For instance, if the US federal government were to allocate emissions reductions obligations to states on the basis of morally relevant criteria, a state would be justified in setting its emissions levels in accordance with its national allocation. Among ethicists there are contested views about what ethics requires regarding the allocation of emissions targets among greenhouse gas emitting activities and governments. Should, for instance, national greenhouse gas emissions allocations be determined strictly on a per capita basis or should differences be recognized on the basis of luxury created emissions versus need based emissions. To what extent should prior levels of emissions count in future emissions allocations. There are numerous ethical questions that any determinations of fair allocations need to consider. Yet, despite the complexity in determining what is any government's fair share of safe global emissions, no government can argue that it does not have a duty to reduce its emissions to its fair share even if one concedes that fairness is a judgment about which different ethical principles might lead to different results. For these reasons, regional and local governments can't deny that they have a duty to reduce their emissions to just levels.

III. The Pennsylvania Case

To its credit, the Rendell administration in Pennsylvania has been advocating for new energy independence legislation that would fund more renewable energy, create incentives for energy conservation, and do a few other things that will help reduce climate change causing emissions in Pennsylvania. In 2005, Pennsylvania also adopted a law that required 18 percent of electricity supplied at the retail level in 2020 be supplied by non-conventional fossil fuel sources. Yet, even if the new energy independence legislation is enacted Pennsylvania will likely fall far short of putting itself on a glide path to reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions to levels that would represent Pennsylvania's fair share of safe global emissions.

Unlike 12 other US states, Pennsylvania has not set a state-wide emission target. California, for instance, has committed to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010, 1990 levels by 2020, and an 80 per cent reduction by 2050. Because energy demand is going up in all states every year, unless a state adopts an absolute greenhouse gas emissions target, total greenhouse gas emissions can increase even in states that have adopted laws that require some percentage improvements in the kind of energy being supplied. For instance, even if Pennsylvania were to require that 20 per cent of all energy (including energy for transportation, domestic, and industrial uses) be derived from renewable energy sources in 2030, total greenhouse gas emissions will likely be greater in 2030 than they are now because energy demand is likely to continue to increase by 2 per cent per year and there are 22 years until the target would be applicable. Even if demand grows less than 2 % per year, without a state-wide enforceable greenhouse gas target, there is no way of assuring that greenhouse gas emissions from Pennsylvania will reach the level of reductions from all sources that are needed by 2050 (at least 80 percent) to make sure Pennsylvania does its fair share in reducing the climate change menace.

Some justify Pennsylvania's lack of a state-wide greenhouse gas target on the political reality that Pennsylvania is a coal producing state. Yet, New Mexico, which produces significant amounts of coal, has adopted a target of reducing greenhouse gases by 75% by 2050. Even if a state was uniquely the user of energy that creates high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, that state could not argue that it had no duty to reduce its emissions to its fair share of global emissions although existing energy mix options might be a relevant factor in determining what is that state's fair share.

IV. The Need To Motivate Citizens To Ethically Supportable Greenhouse Gas Emissions

In addition to adopting a target, a case can be made governments have a duty to inform citizens that they have an ethical duty to reduce their emissions. In support of its Energy Independence legislation, the Rendell administration in Pennsylvania has been appealing mostly to the new jobs that will be created by green energy and the independence from foreign oil that such legislation would help enable. Although the Pennsylvania Governor occasionally mentions climate change as partial justification for his energy legislation, he has rarely, if ever, talked about the moral obligation of Pennsylvania to reduce its emissions nor made reduction of the threat of climate change a high priority political objective in Pennsylvania. Yet, to achieve the magnitude of emissions reductions needed to prevent serious climate change, political leaders need to appeal to motivations other than economic self-interest and set the relevant government on a glide path to achieve that government's fair share of safe global emissions.

The United States needs leaders that will inspire all citizens to reduce their carbon footprint even if it requires some economic sacrifice, some inconvenience in reducing the number of trips to the store, some car pooling, some use of public transportation, smaller, more efficient cars, turning off all electric devices when they are not needed, or energy taxes that begin to adjust energy costs to take into account the full cost of fossil fuel use. Narrow appeals to economic self-interest as justification for climate change policies will fail to mobilize the public response that could be inspired by an appeal to global justice. Appeals to self-interest implicitly justify greenhouse gas emitting activities that can be easily afforded by those who want to engage in them.

Appeals to economic self-interest alone will particularly fail to work for those who can afford to pay for higher energy costs that enable unnecessary luxury uses of energy. Pennsylvanians should reduce their carbon footprint not because they will gain economically (although this may be true), but because they understand that they are obligated to poor people around the world and future generations to do so.

Some Americans will respond to ethical and moral obligations once understood, even if all

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 January 2010 (1)
 December 2009 (3)
 November 2009 (1)
 October 2009 (8)
 September 2009 (2)
 August 2009 (4)
 June 2009 (1)
 May 2009 (1)
 April 2009 (2)
 February 2009 (1)
 January 2009 (5)
 December 2008 (2)
 October 2008 (1)
 August 2008 (1)
 July 2008 (3)
 June 2008 (3)
 May 2008 (1)
 April 2008 (1)
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Americans do not. For this reason, government leaders at all levels should communicate to their constituencies that reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is a moral imperative.

References:

Nations Must Follow Climate Change Justice, Climateethics.org, <http://climateethics.org/?p=20>

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