Congress should enact reasonable cost of carbon and require fossil fuel producers pay

I loved the way your editorial distinguished between acknowledging the economic situation that is killing coal, and also the health reasons to further cut coal emissions, from the public's perception that these changes are happening due to heavy-handed regulations. When the public doesn't see a logical and consistent process for deciding when to close a coal plant or make its operations cleaner, the public may resent the decision.

This is why I appreciate a series of recent court cases that dealt with utilities or government agencies making energy decisions (to allow a new coal mining permit, to install solar or build a new natural gas powered plant). In these cases, the judges ruled that the costs to ratepayers must be minimized while maximizing energy reliability and ensuring our freedoms. The judges each specified something important: when comparing costs and benefits of different options, the utilities and agencies must factor in a cost of fossil fuel pollution that represents the health and environmental costs to the public when coal, oil or natural gas are produced or burned.

Two years ago a Colorado judge denied a permit in a case when a government agency used zero as a cost of carbon pollution. The decision was not heavy-handed because reasonable people can agree that the cost of pollution-induced asthma, cancer, or heart disease is not zero.

More recently, a judge in Minnesota ruled that the cost of carbon used routinely by local utilities and agencies needs to be raised because it was set 10 years ago and is now too low. The judge recommended using the federal government's rates for a cost of carbon.

We could avoid a lot of lawsuits and feelings of unfairness if Congress would enact a reasonable cost of carbon and would require fossil fuel producers pay this cost. Then distribute the revenue to the public so that we're shielded from energy price increases, and so that we don't resent doing the right thing.

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