

Black and White—and Green All Over

America is going green these days, including communications giants like Yahoo!, retailers like Starbucks, and cities from Seattle to Sarasota. These efforts do count: if every household in America replaced just one regular lightbulb with an energy-efficient fluorescent one, we would curb the equivalent amount of greenhouse gas emissions from more than 800,000 cars.

RFF is no exception to the trend. Our office complex in Washington, built 20 years ago, anticipated future needs by installing an energy-saving cooling system that relies on blocks of ice to pump chilly air, “heat-mirror” windows, and energy-efficient lighting. Over the past year, we have planted a green roof that provides additional insulation and prevents water runoff. And we are actively looking for new strategies that will further lessen our environmental impact.

Implementing these brick-and-mortar measures helps us save money and curb carbon emissions. We could do so because the expected results are easy to measure. But the picture becomes much less clear when we talk about climate change policy at the national level; as with corporate greening, in the policy arena we must sort out reality from hype. As policy professionals, RFF scholars like to look behind the green curtain and closely analyze the black-and-white numbers.

In this issue, Senior Fellow Ian Parry questions whether Congress is overlooking the advantages a carbon tax would have compared to a cap-and-trade auction system for controlling emissions. Senior Fellow Roger Sedjo also takes a step back from the headlines to analyze the environmental consequences of various biofuels, looking at their carbon emissions, cost trade-offs, and land-use implications. On our website, you can find additional projects related to climate policy.

Energy and climate issues are scarcely the only things we are working on, however. In her lead article, Fellow Sandra Hoffmann looks at how the system of food safety regulations in this country does—and does not—guarantee the purity of what we feed to our pets, to say nothing of the spinach in our salad.

Effective change will require all of us—leaders and citizens alike—to focus, as economists say, on both the macro and the micro levels. We need to make smart choices in the produce aisle and learn more about how global trade regulations affect the safety of what we do buy. And we need to take a closer look at our individual carbon footprints, and, as a country, to better recognize how our domestic carbon policies fit with global efforts.

As individuals, we can do our part. As a nation, effective policy will be found in the devilish black-and-white details of analysis.



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