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**A CALL TO ACTION: CAUSES OF DIRTY AIR ARE CLEAR; SOLUTIONS ARE WITHIN OUR REACH**

The headlines are unremittingly bad. Once again, East Tennessee's air has been determined to be among the dirtiest in the nation.

*Commentary by John Nolt, PhD*

Air pollution and acid precipitation threaten the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Neurotoxic airborne mercury is finding its way into the bodies of fish and people. Symptoms of global warming proliferate.

The causes of these hazards are increasingly clear, meaning that the solutions are also quite clear. Yet the steps that must be taken to facilitate the solutions are politically difficult. As a result, our policymakers continue to do nothing.

The pollution for which East Tennessee is consistently cited is of two types: ozone -- which damages respiratory tissue and increases the incidence of various forms of acute and chronic lung disease -- and fine particulate matter, which has been linked to asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, lung cancer, heart disease, strokes and birth defects.

"Bad" ozone is formed when nitrogen oxides react with volatile organic compounds already in the air. The nitrogen oxides come mainly from traffic and coal-fired power plants. The prime contributor to fine particulate matter is sulfur dioxide, most of which is produced by coal-fired power plants.

Precipitation at high elevations in the Smokies contains nitric acid from nitrogen oxides and sulfuric acid from sulfur dioxide. The main sources of both pollutants are once again, auto traffic and coal-fired power plants.

Airborne mercury is released mainly by the chemical industry ...and coal-fired power plants.

Global warming is caused by the accumulation of solar heat trapped in the atmosphere by greenhouse gases. These gases include carbon dioxide, as well as ozone and nitrogen oxides coming from -- you guessed it -- traffic and coal-fired power plants.

Traffic burns petroleum. Power plants burn coal. Both are fossil fuels. Our region's unhealthy air, the damage to the Park, as well as the increasingly dangerous instability of the atmosphere all have one major cause: the burning of fossil fuels, including petroleum-powered vehicles and coal-fired power plants.

With the cause so glaringly evident, the cure is equally clear: thrift in the use of fossil fuels.

But thrift is out of fashion. Each year we buy bigger vehicles and drive them more miles. There are more drivers on the road with each successive decade. Although it's true that technological improvements have made engines cleaner, consumptive trends have swamped these benefits. Thus, total traffic emissions continue to rise.

By contrast, coal plant pollution has decreased in some ways. TVA, for example, has been installing pollution control technology to reduce total sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions. This work, however, is incomplete, and there is no guarantee that it *will* be completed.

Fewer than half of TVA's coal-fired boilers, for example, are equipped with scrubbers to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions. And combustion of coal, which is mostly carbon, inevitably produces carbon dioxide. So, despite the notable progress on sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, the coal plants' enormous carbon dioxide emissions continue to rise.

If East Tennessee is to clear the air, these trends must be reversed. The best way to address consumption is through economic incentives. We must, therefore, somehow find political leaders at all levels of government who are courageous enough to tell us what we don't want to hear: that fossil fuels -- particularly coal, gasoline, and diesel fuel

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– need to be taxed much more heavily than they are today.

This taxation would act as “economic chemotherapy.” It might weaken the economy in the short run, but it would make people, our environment, and our economy healthier in the long run.

Gas and diesel taxes would induce innovations in efficiency, forcing American auto manufacturers, for example, to become competitive in an increasingly fuel-lean world economy. They would provide an incentive to revitalize cities by creating a corresponding disincentive for suburban sprawl. This would reduce our reliance on foreign oil and our propensity to fight wars to ensure access to the dwindling supply. The resulting revenues could be used to fund or subsidize healthier forms of transportation: affordable hybrid and fuel-cell vehicles, convenient mass transit, and realistic options for walking and biking.

Higher taxes on coal would encourage an even larger ensemble of efficiencies. They would reduce the terrible damage of strip-mining and mountaintop removal. They would stimulate the rapid development of more sustainable energy sources: solar power, fuel cells, landfill methane, windmills, biomass fuels, tidal energy, geothermal energy - and (though it, too, has its dangers) nuclear energy.

None of this can happen, of course, under the current federal administration, mired as it is in the lucre of coal and oil. The first step in clearing the air, then, is to remove from office a president whose “Clear Skies Initiative” would actually weaken Clear Air Act provisions on power plant emissions, and whose withdrawal from the Kyoto accord on climate change has scuttled an historic international effort to reduce global warming. There is no hope for national thrift in the use of fossil fuels under George W. Bush.

But thrift is also the responsibility of individuals. I and my family might be safer or more comfortable in an SUV, but we would be a greater danger to other travelers; to the quality of the air everyone breathes; to the high streams and flora and fauna of the Great Smoky Mountains; to asthmatic children, and to the integrity of the Earth's atmosphere. No thanks. We'll bike or walk. It's healthier all around. Or take a small car when we have no other option.

*John Nolt, PhD is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee, and the author of Down to Earth Toward a Philosophy of Nonviolent Living (Earth Knows, 1995). Between 1995 to 1997, Dr. Nolt led a project to produce a bioregional assessment of ecological health: **What Have We Done? The Foundation for Global Sustainability's State of the Bioregion Report for the Upper Tennessee Valley and Southern Appalachian Mountains** (Earth Knows, 1997).*

**NOTE TO READERS:** This is a commentary. It reflects only the views of the writer, and not those of WBIR, its management, or its parent company, Gannett.

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