

[An Open Letter to Bill McKibben: in The Nation May 3rd](#)

An Open Letter and Appeal to Bill McKibben and 350.org

[Lorna Salzman, environmental writer, lecturer and activist, asks McKibben why he and his organization have proposed no serious plan of action to realize the very important goal of their organization. April 25, 2010]

Dear Bill:

Many environmental activists, including myself, have applauded your work and your writings for years and we know they have had a positive impact on many members of the general public. Most recently, your 350.org organization has helped publicize the climate change issue and thus has led the mass media to an acknowledgement of the impeccable scientific argument justifying this 350 figure: a rapid reduction in atmospheric CO₂ from the present 389 parts per million (ppm) back down to 350, the single most effective way available at present to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

But I am troubled by the inexplicable fact that neither you nor 350.org has proposed specific actions, policies or legislation to actually reach that goal. The need for articulating these details is especially urgent, as the U. S. congress continues to not only debate over the goal itself but has, at the urging of special interests such as the coal, nuclear and oil industries and major corporations involved in biofuels and agribusiness, de-fanged the Waxman/Markey energy bill in congress so as to minimize their own responsibilities and maximize their profits. This bill comes uncomfortably close to being a denial of the facts about global warming.

Even some of the major national environmental groups like Natural Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense Fund have aligned themselves not with the best science or the public interest but with corporations in the coalition called US Climate Action Partnership (USCAP), seeking modern "indulgences", namely carbon permit trading, called cap-and-trade, which will allow the indefinite operation of coal-fueled power plants, the major source of CO₂, whose rapid shut-down should be the centerpiece of any sane energy policy. Despite such a carbon market in Europe, energy consumption there continues to rise each year.

In addition to this scheme, which will create yet another market in derivatives like the one that has shredded our economy and enriched brokers and traders, (including Al Gore, founder of a carbon trading firm), new coal-fired plants are on the drawing board, with their owners passing on the costs to the government (i.e.public) of pie-in-the-sky speculative schemes for carbon capture and storage (CCS), yet another of the ill-advised subsidies to the energy sector that keep energy too cheap to spur serious energy conservation or alternatives. All this is in addition to the tens of billions of dollars in loan guarantees that Pres. Obama is urging for nuclear reactors that the private sector, quite rationally, refuses to invest in and which are neither safe nor cheap and which will deprive renewable energy technologies of the necessary capital and public support.

The central problem, as you well know, is that none of these schemes has any chance of making a dent in the climate problem in the time frame remaining to us. Expert scientists and scientific bodies now unanimously agree that we have less than ten years to reduce the CO₂ concentration to 350 ppm to avoid increasing the global temperature more than 2 degrees Centigrade above pre-industrial times.

Beyond this period, irreversible and uncontrollable feedback will occur from disappearing ice sheets, melting permafrost and ocean warming, reducing biodiversity, destroying coral reefs, acidifying the oceans, raising sea level, and leading inevitably to crises in drinking water, food production, land use and public health that will cost societies far more than it will cost to mitigate or avoid these impacts. Recent scientific conferences addressed the strong possibility that the earth's temperature will increase within this century or soon after by up to six degrees Centigrade, a level not experienced on earth in tens of millions of years.

In this period, absent a plan to phase out existing coal plants and mandate serious cuts in energy use, fossil fuel consumption will continue to rise as it has since 1990, by 2% each year. Regrettably, renewable energy technologies, however well funded, will not become sufficiently operative in time to head off a climate emergency since it takes 50 years to completely replace an energy system and economy.

The obvious solution, urgent if only partial, is to cut energy consumption quickly and drastically in all sectors and on all fronts, using whatever strategies are needed: a transparent carbon tax on fossil fuels at their point of extraction, production or import; an end to all fossil fuel subsidies and tax breaks; stringent mandatory energy efficiency standards and measures for all sectors, especially new construction; and gasoline rationing, among other things.

It is imperative that energy prices increase to reflect the full costs of production and their impact on the atmosphere and climate change. Cheap energy created the problem; that era must end as soon as possible.

Yet your group, 350.org, and you personally, have chosen NOT to propose any specific strategy or route to achieve that reduction down to 350 ppm. Many of us are truly puzzled, even aghast, at your reluctance to follow through in an effective and honest way.

We know that you are well informed on the issue and we see proof of your concern and dedication. You are looked to as a leader and spokesman. You influence public discourse. But all your work will come to naught if the energy legislation now in congress moves forward in its present form and your organization does not step up to the bat and help shape a serious, science-based national energy policy in Washington.

All of us need to pull together with a unified, honest and scientifically credible legislative agenda. I therefore make this personal plea to you to put your own reputation and that of 350.org on the line, and join groups like ClimateSOS and Rising Tide in opposing any legislation that includes carbon trading and fossil/nuclear energy subsidies, and which does not propose massive immediate cuts in energy consumption across the board.

Anything less than this would be intellectually dishonest on all our parts. If we truly believe that we must cut back to 350 ppm within five years, there is no alternative to shunting the existing energy legislation (ACESA) aside and replacing it with an uncompromising muscular piece of legislation. Anything else would literally doom our civilization.

Lorna Salzman

(Salzman is an environmental writer, lecturer and activist who, starting in the early 1970s worked for major national environmental organizations as well as the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She was the Suffolk County Green Party candidate for congress in 2002, and in 2004 she sought the presidential nomination of the U.S. Green Party. Contributions to defray the cost of this ad are welcome; please contact the author at: lsalzman1. Her web site is: www.lornasalzman.com)

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<http://tinyurl.com/29dlge5>

For discussion on plans to prevent Catastrophic Climate Change:

http://www.redandgreen.org/Climate_Change

See positions of McKibben at www.350.org

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