

A DIFFERENT VIEW: Carbon credit opponents play cynical games with dangerous costs

- By Joseph Minott Capital-Star Guest Contributor
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Republicans in Harrisburg think Pennsylvanians are gullible. They have spent the past two-and-a-half years desperately trying to protect the fossil fuel industry by blocking Pennsylvania's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), a successful bipartisan program that has significantly cut pollution from power plants in our neighboring states while raising over \$4.7 billion for reinvestment and saving billions of dollars in avoided public health costs.

Republicans in both chambers have introduced multiple bills and resolutions — both this session and last — that would stop Pennsylvania from sharing in these benefits.

They have failed every time, thanks to Gov. Tom Wolf's veto pen. In a new twist, Rep. Jim Struzzi, R-Indiana, offered an amendment last month to his own bill, House Bill 637, that cynically tries to put window dressing on it to attract more votes. Pennsylvania voters need to see this bill for what it is — and urge their representatives to vote against it.

The amended HB 637 has been renamed the “Energy Sustainability and Investment Act.” It would still block RGGI, while at the same time authorizing a one-time expenditure of \$250 million using federal COVID-19 relief funds on items including R&D for carbon capture and hydrogen projects, plugging orphan gas wells, improving sewer and stormwater infrastructure, and assisting workers and communities affected by coal plant closures. These are worthwhile needs in the Commonwealth, but the reality is this bill comes up short in several key areas.

First, it’s remarkably shortsighted. Pennsylvania’s participation in RGGI could raise \$250 million in just one or two quarters alone. Instead of a one-time raid of COVID relief funds, RGGI would create ongoing investment opportunities for Pennsylvania far in excess of \$250 million every single year. Indeed, there are two companion bills, Senate Bill 15 (Comitta) and House Bill 1565 (Herrin), proposing to allocate significant RGGI dollars to support fossil fuel worker transition projects over this decade. Republicans in Harrisburg refuse to give either bill a committee hearing, much less a floor vote.

Second, other priorities in the amended HB 637 are already receiving significantly greater dollar amounts from federal legislation like the American Rescue Plan Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). For example, Pennsylvania is eligible to receive around \$400 million over the next 10 years to plug orphan gas wells from various grants in the BIL. That law also offers billions of dollars to fund regional carbon capture and hydrogen hubs and advanced battery storage technologies. The amended HB 637 just offers a redundant drop in the bucket in an effort to distract from its true goal — protecting the fossil fuel industry.

Importantly, Struzzi’s amendment goes further than just blocking RGGI. It would apply retroactively to any existing “measure or action” taken by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to control or limit carbon pollution. Any such existing measure or action would be “abrogated,” meaning this bill doesn’t just strip DEP of its ability to do anything to address the devastating impacts of climate change going forward, it nullifies all actions DEP currently has in place. This is dangerous extremism. It also means Republicans could continue to force this bill on the Commonwealth even after Pennsylvania’s RGGI program takes effect, which is expected in April.

Despite what fossil fuel apologists and Republican lawmakers would have you believe, here are the facts: RGGI participation will create jobs in Pennsylvania, cut dangerous pollution from power plants, and invest in energy efficiency that can reduce consumers’ energy bills. The amended HB 637 is political gamesmanship — pure and simple. If RGGI opponents truly believe in reducing methane pollution from orphan gas wells, protecting communities from flooding, and helping communities manage ongoing energy market transitions, they should take up SB 15 or HB 1565.

With the eyes of the world watching the horrifying and indefensible invasion of Ukraine by Russia, it is clearer than ever that clean energy is our best response to free the energy market from the brutal aggression of Putin and other petro-dictators. They rely on international fossil fuel demand to prop up their national economies. As long as America, and Pennsylvania, are dependent on fossil fuels, consumers will be subject to the volatile price swings associated with

these global commodities. It's a shame that RGGI opponents just want to play political games promoting coal and gas companies instead of protecting Pennsylvanians.

The column was reprinted with permission by opinion contributor Joseph Minott and the Pennsylvania Capital-Star.

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