

Climate change: a moral issue on a par with slavery

Prof Jim Hansen to use lecture at Edinburgh International Science Festival to call for worldwide tax on all carbon emissions

Severin Carrell - guardian.co.uk, April 2012

Jim Hansen, who will next Tuesday be awarded the prestigious Edinburgh Medal for his contribution to science, will also in his acceptance speech call for a worldwide tax on all carbon emissions.

Now 70, Hansen is regarded as one of the most influential figures in climate science; the creator of one of the first global climate models, his pioneering role in warning about global warming is frequently cited by climate campaigners such as former US vice president Al Gore.

Hansen will argue in his lecture that current generations have an over-riding moral duty to their children and grandchildren to take immediate action. Describing this as an issue of inter-generational justice on a par with ending slavery, Hansen said: "Our parents didn't know that they were causing a problem for future generations but we can only pretend we don't know because the science is now crystal clear.

"We understand the carbon cycle: the CO₂ we put in the air will stay in surface reservoirs and won't go back into the solid earth for millennia. What the Earth's history tells us is that there's a limit on how much we can put in the air without guaranteeing disastrous consequences for future generations. We cannot pretend that we did not know."

Hansen said his proposal for a global carbon tax was based on the latest analysis of CO₂ levels in the atmosphere and their impact on global temperatures and weather patterns. He has co-authored a scientific paper with 17 other experts, including climate scientists, biologists and economists, which calls for an immediate 6% annual cut in CO₂ emissions, and a substantial growth in global forest cover, to avoid catastrophic climate change by the end of the century.

The paper, which has passed peer review and is in the final stages of publication by the US journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, argues that a global levy on fossil fuels is the

strongest tool for forcing energy firms and consumers to switch quickly to zero carbon and green energy sources. In larger countries, that would include nuclear power.

Under this proposal, the carbon levy would increase year on year, with the tax income paid directly back to the public as a dividend, shared equally, rather than put into government coffers. Because the tax would greatly increase the cost of fossil fuel energy, consumers relying on green or low carbon sources of power would benefit the most as this dividend would come on top of cheaper fuel bills. It would promote a dramatic increase in the investment and development of low-carbon energy sources and technologies.

The very rich and most profligate energy users, people with several homes, or private jets and fuel-hungry cars, would also be forced into dramatically changing their energy use.

Had similar action been taken in 2005, when the Kyoto protocol on climate change came into force, the CO₂ emission reductions would have been at a more manageable 3% a year.

Hansen said current attempts to limit carbon emissions, particularly the European Union's emissions trading mechanism introduced under the Kyoto protocol which restricts how much CO₂ an industry can emit before it has to pay a fee for higher emissions, were "completely ineffectual".

"We can't simply say that there's a climate problem, and leave it to the politicians. They're so clearly under the influence of the fossil fuel industry that they're coming up with cockamamie solutions which aren't solutions. That is the bottom line," he said.