

Deceptive California Climate Bill Pushes Geoengineering

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In a surreptitious yet aggressive effort to promote unproven and risky climate [geoengineering](#), California state legislators have recently introduced a [bill](#) that places extensive emphasis on the presumed potential of trees, forests and soils for carbon sequestration — while explicitly promoting a climate policy framework vision that celebrates and advances morally hazardous and environmentally dangerous [geoengineering technologies](#) for “carbon dioxide removal” (CDR) and “negative emissions.”

While carrying a title that refers directly to “natural and working lands,” the [bill](#) specifically describes the potential for “entirely new industries created around recycling carbon dioxide emissions into useful products such as clean fuels” as well as the “storage capacity” in “geological formations in California to permanently store carbon dioxide.”

The bill language repeats unsubstantiated assumptions regarding the benefits of [geoengineering](#), while failing to even mention the controversial term, and fully ignoring the abundant evidence that the technical, environmental, economic and social justice barriers of such technologies are very real.

To make matters worse, the authors of the bill have appropriated language from the climate justice movement to try and give the deceptive bill a public relations boost.

[Senator Nancy Skinner](#), a Democrat from Berkeley, went so far in [the press release announcing the introduction of the legislation](#) as to call the bill “Keeping Carbon In The Ground,” without offering any attribution to the political, historical and scientific significance of such language. Using such rhetorical tricks to socialize and justify unproven geoengineering technologies is a perverse twisting of the climate science fundamental of the imperative to “Keep Fossil Fuels In The Ground.”

Regardless of the misleading public relations twist to paint the bill as a “keep it in the ground” effort, nowhere in the bill is there any language that would put any limits on oil and gas drilling in the state, nor does the bill language address the ongoing industrial destruction of California’s forests due to intensive timber harvest practices such as clearcutting. Rather, the bill focuses in it’s entirety on supposedly addressing climate pollution after it has occurred through the management of forests and soils to sequester carbon, and in promoting an increased concentration of industrial capacity in the state for geoengineering technologies, many of which the fossil fuel industry has a long history of attempting to develop as a distraction from real regulation on their extractive activities.

The focus of the legislation on forests does of course, on the face of it, seem innocent enough. Yet, it is the fine print of the bill that reveals how California is boldly entering into a “brave new world” of developing techno-centric climate policy that promotes and incentivizes unproven and potentially illegal geoengineering mechanisms that promise to intensify the industrial exploitation of California’s forests as well as lock-in long-term use of fossil fuels – both of which are outcomes which would undoubtedly exacerbate the climate crisis.

Though the unsubstantiated assertions present in the bill regarding current land and forest management in the state are of great concern, even more worrisome is the manner in which trees and forests are used to provide public relations cover for a science fiction worthy proposal: that California lead the way globally in the development of geoengineering technologies such as “direct air capture” and “carbon capture utilization and sequestration,” both of which are mentioned specifically in the language of the new bill, and that are both explicitly categorized as geoengineering in international discussions regarding the need for governance of these technologies.

The conflation of the natural function of ecosystems with the hypothetical outcomes of machines and other artificial means to attempt to pull carbon out of the atmosphere is not only ethically dubious for the demeaning and utilitarian view of forests that such a frame offers. The purposeful attempt to hide a geoengineering agenda literally behind a “green” cover of trees and forests reeks of a communications campaign to manage public perception and socialize with a “natural” spin the growing thrust of California authorities to rely on unproven technologies to address the climate crisis.

The outlandish and desperate vision for a “negative emissions system” embodied in the legislation is contained in the direct reference in the bill to the “Getting to Neutral” report from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) and ClimateWorks Foundation. Notably, ClimateWorks Foundation has numerous direct ties to the fossil fuel industry, exemplified by the links of the founding chair of the foundation with an equity fund with multiple very significant investments in the oil and gas sector.

The “Getting to Neutral” report was featured in the California state capitol of Sacramento at the February 3 hearing of the Joint Legislative Committee on Climate Change Policies, on which Senator Skinner serves as a member. Assemblymember Cristina Garcia, co-author of the geoengineering bill with Senator Skinner, is the Chair of the committee.

The hearing testimony from the authors of the “Getting to Neutral” report was unabashed in promoting a Bioenergy Carbon Capture and Sequestration (BECCS) vision for California, that once developed and implemented in the state could there after be exported to the world.

This hypothetical “negative emissions system” as drafted in the LLNL report would require the construction of dozens of new high-tech biomass burning facilities throughout the state. These facilities would generate electricity

through the “utilization of woody biomass” sourced from intensive forest management. These new biomass plants would ostensibly all be outfitted with unproven “carbon capture” equipment to capture the significant emissions that come from burning biomass for electricity.

The “captured carbon” from these new biomass energy operations would then be transported by truck and through a brand new extensive carbon dioxide pipeline system connecting locations through out the state to destinations in the Central Valley, whereby the captured CO₂ would be theoretically injected into the ground for storage in the geological formations that previously held oil and gas.

The bill as introduced closely mimics the dynamics of the February 3 committee hearing in that the hearing failed in any way to discuss or recognize that “negative emissions technologies” are projected to have potentially severe land use, water and biodiversity consequences, as well as uncertain ecosystem impacts. The land use, energy system and climate policy impacts carry with them significant implications for the protection of human rights and the advancement of environmental justice.

Additionally, the technical barriers to these unproven technologies are immense. They are unproven and non-existent at scale, and they would likely require even more biomass to be burned to power the proposed capture of the emissions – requiring such large amounts of energy that these installations would actually incur an energy penalty.

None of these well-documented concerns about geoengineering, BECCS and “negative emissions technologies” were discussed at the hearing, and the subsequent bill contains no reference to safeguarding against these risks.

Ultimately this matter is one of extreme moral hazard, and our organization will take a strong stand to counter this dangerous legislation as it heads towards committee hearings in early spring 2020. Relying on the fantasy of “negative emissions” to save us in the future is an issue of risk, yet the distribution of that risk is highly inequitable. The lack of incentive to guard against risk where one is protected from the consequences serves as a clinical definition of moral hazard.

In this instance, the California state legislature is toying with dangerous distractions of hypothetical technical mechanisms disguised as management of nature, while failing to take the political risks that are necessary to advance true climate solutions. Rather than putting an end to the combustion of fossil fuels, destructive industrial agriculture and the perpetual intensive harvest of our forests, these legislators take the less politically contentious path of support for unproven techno-fixes, which unfortunately, because of the probable environmental and social impacts from such mechanisms, run a real risk of making the situation worse.