House Western Caucus

Forum on House Resolution 109, the Green New Deal

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Remarks of
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Chairman Gosar and Members of the House Western Caucus, Thank you for inviting me to speak today at this forum on the Green New Deal. My name is Myron Ebell, and I am director of the Center for Energy and Environment at the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), a non-profit, non-partisan public policy institute that focuses on regulatory issues from a free-market and limited-government perspective. CEI accepts no government funding. CEI and I have been involved in a wide range of energy, environmental, and climate issues since the late 1980s.

The Green New Deal is neither green, nor particularly new, and is about as bad a deal as can be imagined. Its name hearkens back to the romantic memories many Americans have of the New Deal. The New Deal of the 1930s was a series of relatively modest *ad hoc* programs intended to put people back to work and lift the economy out of the Depression. But the Green New Deal is much more ambitious than the New Deal. The resolution recognizes this in its final Whereas:

"Whereas the House of Representatives recognizes that a new national, social, industrial, and economic mobilization on a scale not seen since World War II and the New Deal era is a historic opportunity— (1) to create millions of good, high-wage jobs in the United States; (2) to provide unprecedented levels of prosperity and economic security for all people of the United States; and (3) to counteract systemic injustices…."

The breadth of what is being proposed would, as the sponsors admit, require a national economic mobilization on the scale of what was done in the Second World War. But in fact,

they are too modest. The mobilization necessary would dwarf what was required to win the war. The federal government commandeered the economy for four years. Over forty percent of the annual gross domestic product was diverted to the war effort. There were price and wage controls and a wide variety of consumer products were rationed, including gasoline, tires, meat, milk, cheese, butter, cooking oil, sugar, and coffee. Civilians could not purchase new cars and building materials could only be purchased for repairs deemed necessary.

The national economic mobilization required by the Green New Deal would last much longer; and given the history of similar mobilizations in the past would probably turn into permanent government command-and-control over large parts of the economy. There have been several similar events in modern times. Each one was initiated by a tyrannical or authoritarian government, and as the mobilization proceeded ever harsher and more brutal measures were required. Each one ended in total failure.

Probably the most apt comparison is China's Great Leap Forward, which the Communist Party launched in 1958. The goal was to transform China, a largely peasant society, into a modern industrial powerhouse and at the same time fully communalize agriculture. The tools used were government coercion, followed quickly by terror and violence. After massive investments and even more massive social dislocation, the results were total failure and widespread starvation. Estimates of the number of people who died as a result of the Great Leap Forward range from 18 million to 55 million.

The Great Leap Forward is the model for what we might call the Green Leap Backward in key respects. Both aim at the total transformation of society; both require command-and-control methods; and both are the product of utopian fantasy.

House Resolution 109 lays out broad and ambitious goals under three main headings, which I would characterize as climate nirvana, wealth redistribution, and social justice. Thus, the plan within ten years must transition "the U.S. economy to become greenhouse gas emissions neutral." Second, the federal government must create a "job guarantee program to assure a living wage job to every person who wants one," and provide a wide variety of benefits, including universal health care. Third, social justice must be achieved "by stopping current, preventing future, and repairing historic oppression of indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth (referred to in this resolution as 'frontline and vulnerable communities')."

The second and third goals are standard leftist claptrap, and the resolution's wooly thinking is at its wooliest here. No explanation is given of how turning the energy economy upside down would contribute to achieving them. In my remarks today, I shall therefore ignore the wealth redistribution and social justice goals of the Green New Deal (although I do want to mention that my colleague Iain Murray has posted a useful overview of these provisions on CEI's Open Market) and instead concentrate on the nuts and bolts of transforming America's energy economy.

Several economic forecasters have already come forward with preliminary and incomplete estimates of how much the Green New Deal would cost. The cost estimates range from trillions to tens of trillions of dollars. Although it is clear that the potential costs of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions are much larger than the alleged benefits in terms of avoided increases in the global mean temperature (which would be hard to measure at best), whether the total costs would be $5 trillion or $50 trillion doesn't really matter. In the first place, that's because what is being proposed cannot be accomplished within ten years or even within thirty. In the second place, that's because even if trillions of dollars are expended, the resulting energy production and delivery system cannot possibly work.

According to the resolution, net-zero greenhouse gas emissions would be achieved by replacing the energy derived from coal, oil, and natural gas, which provides roughly 80% of the energy used in the United States, with renewable sources, primarily wind and solar power. Second, all vehicles powered by gasoline or diesel engines would be replaced by electric vehicles and much more widespread electrified mass transit and high-speed trains. Third, every building in America would be replaced or retrofitted for greater energy efficiency. It must be assumed that this would include replacing over 65 million natural gas furnaces with heat pumps, auxiliary electric heaters, and rooftop solar panels. Fourth, agricultural equipment that uses gasoline and diesel would be replaced with electric-powered tractors and perhaps horses, mules, and human power. Ammonia-based fertilizers, which make up 90% of fertilizers used and which are produced primarily from natural gas feedstock, would have to be replaced as well.

The amount of raw materials to build just the hundreds of thousands of windmills and millions of solar panels required to decarbonize the electric and transportation sectors is stupendous. For example, building the base for one windmill takes over five-hundred tons of concrete. The major ingredients in concrete are aggregate and Portland cement, and the chemical reactions required to turn limestone and other ingredients into cement produce a lot of carbon dioxide.

To take another example, the fabrication of electric vehicle batteries takes huge quantities of energy and huge amounts of lithium and other expensive metals. Most of these metals are mined and smelted using fossil-fuel energy. The average age of passenger cars and light trucks is over twelve years. Unless the government orders people to junk their current vehicles and either buy new electric vehicles or rely on mass transit, it would take a generation to replace most of the current vehicle fleet. And what about the heavy equipment used in construction? Are battery-powered earth movers on the drawing board?

My point is that replacing America's energy infrastructure will requiring manufacturing lots of stuff—indeed, a mind-boggling amount of stuff. We must assume that to maintain climate purity, all this stuff will have to be manufactured using renewable energy. It could easily take more than ten years to build the renewable energy capacity needed to build the stuff.

But the material obstacles are only part of the story. Implementing the Green Leap Backward under current permitting practices would be impossible. Under national, state, and local environmental and land-use statutes, it usually takes several years and in some cases many years to permit major projects. For example, the first permit applications for the Cape Wind Project off the coast of Cape Cod in Massachusetts were made in 2001. After permitting delays at all levels, the project was abandoned in 2017. Dozens of similar examples can be cited.

There is a simple solution to the permitting delays that now block projects for years and even decades: it is to suspend national, state, and local environmental and land-use statutes. Yet I have not heard any sponsor of the Green New Deal discussing this problem or its obvious solution.

Beyond what we might call the construction challenges, there is still the problem that even if it's built, it won't work. As I mentioned earlier, about 80 percent of America's energy comes from coal, oil and natural gas. After decades of state mandates and multi-billion dollar federal subsidies, wind and solar accounted for 9 percent of electricity produced in 2017. From 9 percent to 100 percent is a long way to go, and replacing all the gasoline and diesel cars, trucks and tractors with electric vehicles will require much more renewable power. But it won't work because the electric grid becomes unstable and unmanageable as the percentage of power produced by intermittent and variable sources increases. Twenty percent wind and solar poses problems; fifty percent threatens blackouts and collapse.

Various solutions to this problem have been proposed. There is casual talk of building a super-grid and even more casual talk about building sufficient battery storage to provide power when the wind stops blowing and the sun isn't shining. But alas, the super-grid has been imagined but designing it seems to require violating the laws of physics, and the battery technology available for the foreseeable future can provide minutes of expensive backup power, not hours or days. The most practical solution would be the one offered by a British government minister some years ago: people will just have to get used to using electricity when it is available.

I would like to conclude by considering an issue that I think is of special concern to the Members of the Western Caucus, namely some of the impacts the Green Leap Backward would have specifically on rural America, including the rural West. H. Res. 109 contains language about "restoring threatened, endangered, and fragile ecosystems" and talks about "ensuring that public lands, waters, and oceans are protected and that eminent domain is not abused." This window dressing conceals the hard reality that the Green New Deal would constitute an assault on the natural environment and on rural Americans.

The independent English scientist James Lovelock has observed that the modern environmental movement is a kind of imperial domination of the countryside by the urban elite. I and others have called this phenomenon urban eco-imperialism. The Green Leap Backward is the most ambitious example of urban eco-imperialism yet proposed. A rough estimate of the total acreage occupied by all the wind and solar farms required is 80 million

acres, which would be distributed across the country. In addition, tens of thousands of miles of new high-capacity electric transmission lines and thousands of miles of high-speed rail lines would be built.

The environmental damages caused by all these facilities would be catastrophic. For a start, the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act would have to be suspended or completely ignored. That's because arrays of modern wind turbines constitute what the National Audubon Society in 1999 called "Condor Cuisinarts." The existing fleet of wind turbines kills millions of birds and bats a year. The Green Leap Backward would increase the number of turbines by ten- or twenty-fold.

Wind turbines also pose significant health threats to the people living near them. As wind farms occupied more and more of the rural landscape, more and more people would be exposed to these health threats.

Local opposition to new wind and solar farms and to new transmission lines would have to be ignored. To build all the high-capacity transmission lines to connect all the new wind and solar farms to high-population areas would require frequent use of eminent domain. Rights of way for all the new high-speed rail lines would also require frequent use of eminent domain.

The major impacts of the Green New Deal on urban and suburban Americans would primarily be much higher electric rates and much higher transportation costs. Rural and small-town Americans would have to deal with adverse environmental and health impacts as well higher energy costs.

Neither the fact that the Green New Deal would cost far more than any potential benefits nor the fact that it cannot possibly work seem to have dampened the enthusiasm of its proponents. What they are proposing is that we as a nation decide to follow on a much grander scale the example of California's high-speed train folly. We are being asked to spend a lot of money, which in the end would get us nowhere.