

# The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels — What it is and why it matters

By Alex Epstein, founder, Center for Industrial Progress

## How to think about our energy future

Is humanity's continuing—and expanding—use of fossil fuels a moral choice or an immoral choice? To answer this question, we need to be clear on our **standard of value—our metric of good and bad**—in energy and environmental issues.

At the Center for Industrial Progress, our standard of value is: maximizing human flourishing. We reject the common standard of *minimizing human impact*.

To discover what will maximize human flourishing we must think *full context*—we must carefully look at the benefits, risks, and side effects of all our alternatives. We reject the common method of thinking *out-of-context*.

Thus, when we consider fossil fuels, we do not write them off as bad because they cause some man-made CO<sub>2</sub> and some man-made warming, we look carefully at the full context of their potential impacts on human flourishing now and in the future.

## Fossil fuels & human flourishing: *the benefits*

The unmet need for cheap, plentiful, reliable energy:

- There are 7 billion people in the world who need cheap, plentiful, reliable energy to flourish. Some three billion have virtually no energy by our standards, which means we need vastly more energy.
- It is extremely difficult to produce cheap, plentiful, reliable energy. In the entire history of humanity, only three industries have achieved this on any scale: the hydrocarbon (fossil fuel) industry, the nuclear industry, and the hydroelectric power industry.

The unique ability of the fossil fuel industry to meet our energy needs:

- The fossil fuel industry produces over 80% of the world's power because it is the only industry that has figured out how to produce cheap, plentiful, reliable energy for electricity, transportation, and heating on a scale of billions.
- Since the energy industry is the industry that powers every other industry, the fossil fuel industry increases productivity and prosperity in every area of life, from agriculture (diesel-powered farm equipment) to hospitals (24/7 electricity).
- The only industries that can meaningfully supplement fossil fuel energy are the nuclear and hydroelectric industries, which are widely opposed by environmentalists. Even without this opposition fossil fuels would still be irreplaceable for decades to come. Hydro is limited by lack of suitable locations. Nuclear has the long-term potential to expand greatly, but is many decades away from scaling to the level of billions.
- For these reasons, any restriction on fossil fuel use would do devastating damage. This must be factored into all policy debates over restricting fossil fuels to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> or other byproducts.

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**About the author:** Alex Epstein, founder of the Center for Industrial Progress, is a humanist philosopher who seeks to identify the full context of industrial and environmental controversies. His New York Times bestseller *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* has been widely praised as the most persuasive argument ever made against climate catastrophism, and led The McLaughlin Group to name Epstein the most original thinker of 2014.

## **Fossil fuels & human flourishing: *environmental concerns***

The number one environmental concern: climate impacts

- To assess the climate-related impacts of fossil fuel use, we have to carefully assess the consequences to human flourishing of 1) the warming impact of CO<sub>2</sub>, 2) the fertilizing effect of CO<sub>2</sub>, 3) the protecting effect of affordable energy for all climate danger.
- The warming impact of CO<sub>2</sub> is mild and quite possibly positive--in no way does it justify restricting fossil fuel use whatsoever.
  - It is a proven but little-known fact that the greenhouse effect of CO<sub>2</sub> is a diminishing, logarithmic effect; each molecule of CO<sub>2</sub> warms less than the last.
  - The belief that increases in CO<sub>2</sub> will cause runaway warming are based on speculative climate dynamics represented in models that have utterly failed to predict climate.
  - Global average temperatures and CO<sub>2</sub> levels are near all-time lows from a geological perspective; today's CO<sub>2</sub> levels are an estimated 1/20th their all time high (a highly fertile period).
  - Warming is almost universally desired among civilizations, with cold-related deaths dramatically greater than heat-related deaths. In general life thrives under warmer conditions.
- The widely-ignored fertilizing effect of CO<sub>2</sub> is significant and positive, yet ignored; a proper energy and environmental discussion must take it into account.
  - Increasing CO<sub>2</sub> levels is a proven driver of plant growth, which is why greenhouses contain 3 times as much CO<sub>2</sub> as our atmosphere.
  - Satellite data show dramatic increases in plant growth in uninhabited locations as CO<sub>2</sub> levels have increased over the past several decades.
  - Increased CO<sub>2</sub> has also contributed significantly to crop yields and helped millions avoid malnutrition or starvation.
- The widely-ignored protecting effect of fossil fuels is spectacularly positive; it has helped us take the inherently dangerous climate and make it far safer than it has ever been.
  - While the climate debate treats the global climate system as naturally stable and safe, it is in fact naturally volatile and vicious. Climate safety requires climate protection through development and technology--both of which are fueled by affordable energy.
  - The international disaster database, which tracks climate-related deaths--including deaths from flood, droughts, extreme heat, extreme cold, storms, and wildfires--shows a 98% *decrease* in the rate of climate-related deaths since significant CO<sub>2</sub> emissions began 80 years ago.
  - Fossil fuel use doesn't take a safe climate and make it dangerous, it takes a dangerous climate and makes it safe.

For a full analysis of the environmental impacts of fossil fuels, including air, water, and resource impacts, see the book *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*.

## **Help change the conversation**

If we truly look at energy by the standard of human flourishing, we discover that they are not an immoral product we need to restrict but a moral product we need to liberate--just as we need to liberate other persecuted sources of energy such as nuclear power and hydroelectric power. Our society's lack of a clear, pro-human, full-context framework for thinking about energy is leading to disastrous, anti-fossil-fuel, anti-nuclear, anti-hydro policy decisions that are already harming millions and will harm billions.

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