

Climate change poorly understood by US public, survey finds

March 23 2005

Climate change and the threat of global warming are poorly understood by the U.S. public, and taking action to reduce their impact is not a high priority, according to a recent MIT survey.

These results suggest that change in U.S. climate policy will not be led by public opinion. Elected officials will have to provide leadership--a task they will find difficult because achieving significant reduction of the greenhouse gases linked to climate change may involve economic costs well above what the average consumer is willing to pay.

For more than a decade, Howard J. Herzog and his colleagues at MIT's Laboratory for Energy and the Environment (LFEE) have been studying one approach to climate-change mitigation. In carbon-dioxide (CO₂) capture and storage (CCS), the CO₂ emissions from large sources that contribute to global warming are captured and injected into geologic formations for long-term storage.

CCS has technologic and economic promise, but public acceptance could be a problem. As a result, the researchers wanted to find out what people thought about CCS in particular and about climate change and environmental issues in general.

So LFEE Principal Research Engineer Herzog, graduate student Thomas E. Curry, Professor David M. Reiner of the University of Cambridge and Stephen Ansolabehere, the Elting R. Morison Professor in MIT's Department of Political Science, developed a survey that included 17 questions about the environment, global warming and climate-change-

mitigation technologies. They collaborated with Knowledge Networks, a company that specializes in Internet-based public opinion surveys.

The 1,200 respondents proved to be relatively unaware not only of CCS but also of other energy-related responses to climate change that were listed in the survey. The researchers were not surprised that CCS fell under the radar for the general public. It was more surprising that many of the respondents also had not recently heard or read about hydrogen cars, wind energy or nuclear energy.

Most striking: Fully 17 percent of the people had heard or read about none of the listed items during the past year.

Other questions demonstrated the public's lack of understanding. For example, when asked what concern CCS would address, well over half of the respondents said they were not sure. Of those that made a choice, 23 percent said (correctly) that CCS could reduce global warming, but 29 percent said (incorrectly) that it could reduce smog.

The survey further found that the environment and climate change are not high-priority issues for the public. The environment came out 13th on a list of 22 possibilities for "the most important issues facing the U.S. today." And on a list of 10 specific environmental problems, "global warming" came up sixth, well behind water pollution and toxic waste.

What do the survey results mean for public outreach on climate change issues? Researchers concluded that education is critical. Programs should start with the fundamentals, helping people to understand the links between burning fossil fuels, greenhouse gas emissions and the potential for climate change. Perhaps most important, researchers said discussions must include the relative costs of the various technology options, as cost differentials can profoundly influence people's preferences.

In continuing their work on CCS, the MIT researchers plan to administer the same survey in two or three years to measure the evolution of public awareness. In the meantime, they are working with their Alliance for Global Sustainability (AGS) partners to analyze similar surveys taken in Japan, the United Kingdom, and Sweden.

Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Citation: Climate change poorly understood by US public, survey finds (2005, March 23)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2005-03-climate-poorly-understood-survey.html>

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