

Rationing: A fairer way to fight climate change?

February 20 2023



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World War II-style rationing could be an effective way to reduce carbon emissions, according to new research from the University of Leeds.

In a paper published today in the journal *Ethics, Policy and Environment*, academics argue that rationing could help states to reduce [greenhouse gas emissions](#) rapidly and fairly.

Policymakers have considered other schemes to reduce emissions, including [carbon taxes](#) and personal carbon trading schemes, but the researchers say these favor the wealthy, who could buy the right to pollute if trading were allowed.

The authors argue that carbon rationing would instead allow people to receive an equitable portion of resources based on their needs, therefore sharing out the effort to protect the planet.

The authors were based across the University of Leeds' Inter-Disciplinary Ethics Applied Center, Sustainability Research Institute and School of History when they conducted the research.

Joint lead author Dr. Nathan Wood, who is now a Postdoctoral Fellow at Utrecht University's Fair Energy Consortium, said, "The concept of rationing could help, not only in the mitigation of climate change, but also in reference to a variety of other social and political issues—such as the current energy crisis."

Lessons from the past

Records from World War II show that compulsory food rationing was more acceptable to the UK public than voluntary changes to diet when resources became scarce. The policy aimed to share goods and burdens more equally, regardless of wealth, which was an important part of its popularity and success.

Historic rationing policies also introduced price controls on goods to keep key resources affordable for most people. As a result, rates of malnutrition went down during World War II, despite the shortages.

A key difference between World War II rationing and the climate crisis is [public perception](#), the researchers say. The availability of thousands of

garments, gadgets and goods at the click of a button can give the illusion that resources are available in abundance, but the reality is starkly different.

Dr. Rob Lawlor, joint lead author and Lecturer at Leeds' Inter-Disciplinary Ethics Applied Center, said, "There is a limit to how much we can emit if we are to reduce the catastrophic impacts of climate change. In this sense, the scarcity is very real."

Dr. Wood said, "The cost of living crisis has shown what happens when scarcity drives up prices, with energy prices rising steeply and leaving vulnerable groups unable to pay their bills. Currently, those living in energy poverty cannot use anywhere near their fair share of energy supply, whereas the richest in society are free to use as much energy as they can afford."

Dr. Lawlor added, "It seems feasible to reduce emissions overall even while the lowest emitters, often the worst off, may be able to increase their emissions—not despite rationing, but because of rationing and price controls."

What equitable rationing could look like

The researchers suggest that rationing probably wouldn't be the first step. Instead, policy changes could start with stricter regulations and an accompanying information campaign to communicate the benefits of rationing.

Initially, governments could regulate the biggest polluters, such as oil, gas and petrol, long-haul flights and intensive farming, creating scarcity in products that harm the planet. Rationing could then be introduced gradually, to manage the resulting scarcity with the aim of meeting everyone's basic needs.

The academics identified two options for rationing policy. Policymakers could introduce an all-encompassing carbon allowance, giving out 'carbon cards' like bank cards to track and limit usage. Alternatively, governments could ration specifically selected goods, such as flights, petrol, household energy, or even meat or clothing.

Dr. Lawlor said, "Many have proposed carbon allowances and carbon cards before. What is new (or old, taking inspiration from World War II) is the idea that the allowances should not be tradable. Another feature of World War II-style rationing is that price controls on rationed goods would prevent prices from rising with increased demand, benefitting those with the least money."

According to the researchers, it's likely that rationing would accelerate the transition from fossil fuels to cleaner energy and more sustainable lifestyles. Dr. Wood said, "For example, rationing petrol could encourage greater use of, and investment in, low carbon [public transport](#), such as railways and local trams."

The researchers hope the paper will inspire policymakers to consider rationing as a serious option for fighting climate change.

More information: Rationing and Climate Change Mitigation, *Ethics Policy & Environment* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/21550085.2023.2166342](https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2023.2166342)

Provided by University of Leeds

Citation: Rationing: A fairer way to fight climate change? (2023, February 20) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-rationing-fairer-climate.html>

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