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No mere patch protects nature

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Once Congress works its way through the looming budget battles of the next few weeks, a remaining item on its agenda will be whether and how to amend the Toxic Substances Control Act, the principal law governing the regulation of chemicals used in commerce in the United States.

Shortly before his death, Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., introduced a bill with a series of amendments, and it has come under fire from environmentalists who object to provisions shielding industry from responsibility for the environmental and health problems their products sometimes create. The debate frames a fundamental question about how we approach environmental protection in an age of ever more complex environmental problems.

Many politicians and environmentalists go out of their way to assure us that with only modest changes in business as usual we can clean up the environment and improve public health. But that's misleading. To be sure, we could structure our economy so it would do a better job serving the needs of humans and the environment. But it is probably not true that we (and billions of other world citizens) can live, work, and consume the way we in the United States do now and achieve some semblance of a healthy environment.

After several decades of improvement in some parts of the environment, most lingering environmental harms display four characteristics that make them impossible to remedy without significant re-examination of business as usual.

Economic disruptions

First, most, if not all, current environmental harms are tied to useful industrial processes. Addressing these harms could disrupt the economy, at least temporarily. For example, fossil fuels drive climate change as well as a host of other environmental problems. But they are arguably also the backbone of our current economy. Transitioning away from fossil fuels would therefore be an even more massive undertaking than most of us might imagine.

Second, environmental harms are often invisible to the wider public, which makes it very difficult to root out the sources of those harms. Consumers aren't keenly motivated to buy safer products, because they may not perceive the harm, or if they do, not understand how to demand changes. That means deliberate and systemic shifts must come from the regulatory, legal, and corporate actors.

Third, it's often very difficult for scientists to determine definitive levels of environmental risk from particular substances, processes or policies, because the variables involved are too complex and interrelated. And yet, before taking action that might affect a company's profits, we seem determined to wait for scientific certainty. Climate change is Exhibit A of this phenomenon. While we've waited, the problem has worsened significantly. A lesser appreciated example is the EPA's recent refusal to ban certain pesticides connected with

the rapid decline of honeybee populations, at least until the science is more certain. But given the complex stressors affecting honeybees, it is unlikely science will definitively determine one cause for the decline before it is too late.

Finally, for many environmental problems, there is no viable technological fix. We love technological fixes because they spare us from having to make a choice. So, for example, we can capture carbon from coal-fired power plants, and maybe store it safely. But doing so, at least at this time, is not cost-effective. Moreover, reliance on such a technological fix does nothing to address the other environmental problems that arise from using coal or to help us move forward toward more sustainable methods of getting energy.

An honest conversation

The bottom line is that we must make choices – choices that demand we come to grips with what we really value. We can't just pretend that because environmental harms arise from useful industrial processes that the harms don't exist. We can't afford to let invisible harms snowball before taking action. We can't wait for scientific certainty in cases where the evidence is strong, if not certain, and the harms are severe. And we can't wait for the march of technology to solve all our problems.

At minimum, we need an honest conversation, one in which we entertain a candid appraisal of environmental problems, and then consider the environment, energy, climate, economy and lifestyle simultaneously. The longer we continue to delude ourselves into thinking some semblance of environmental harmony can be achieved by patching our current system, the worse, and perhaps irreversible, environmental problems will get. We'll still be making a choice – just an unexamined one that compromises our health, the health of our planet and our children's and grandchildren's future existence and happiness.

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