

Statement by Sam Swanson on behalf of Vermont Interfaith Power and Light

Before the Vermont House Natural Resources Committee on April 16, 2015

Good morning. I am Sam Swanson. My home is in South Burlington, where my wife, Joyce Gallimore, and I have lived for the last 17 years. I am a member there of Ascension Lutheran Church where I chair our Care for Creation Committee.

Betsy Hardy has provided a good picture of what Interfaith Power and Light is and what we do.

I appear today in my role as the President of the Board of Directors of Vermont Interfaith Power and Light to urge you to enact H. 412. This bill offers our state an opportunity to address global warming and to strengthen our economy, increasing personal income and employment opportunities in Vermont for years to come.

We strongly support the program H. 412 would create to align the incentives we address in our every day purchases of goods and services with the critical need to slow global warming and to fund action to reduce the energy required to heat Vermont homes and businesses.

Global warming is perhaps the biggest threat facing humanity today.

Bill McKibben painted a vivid picture of the scale of the impact of in his 2013 speech here. Perhaps you will recall him observing:

“This past summer...saw the catastrophic melt of the Arctic ice sheet; there is now, by area, half the ice that Neil Armstrong saw when he looked down from the moon.” ... “We have, in other words, taken one of the largest physical features on earth and broken it, and others are close behind. . . .”

The very existence of life – life that religious people are called to protect – is jeopardized by our continued dependency on fossil fuels for energy. Every major religion has a mandate to care for Creation. We were given natural resources to sustain us, but we were also given the responsibility to act as good stewards and preserve life for future generations.

Vermont Interfaith Power and Light exists to help the many different faith communities in Vermont take action at home and to support community action to address global warming.

We welcome this opportunity to voice our strong support for the steps proposed by H 412 to impose a price on dumping carbon emissions into the atmosphere and to provide funds to help Vermonters slash heating bills with clean energy, and make buildings more energy efficient. [.....]

All major faith traditions and spiritual communities are increasingly recognizing that on an earth populated by 7.2 billion people we who live here now have a moral responsibility to care for the web of life that sustains us and all who come after us.

Twenty five years ago the major religious traditions paid scant attention to Earth care. Today leaders of all the major religions are speaking out on our responsibility to sustain this planet for all human-kind now and for the generations that follow.

Vermont Interfaith Power and Light was organized ten years ago to support the efforts of individual Vermont congregations to address the climate crisis.

Recognizing that climate change is very much a consequence of our energy use Interfaith Power and Light works hard to promote energy conservation, energy efficiency, and renewable energy. The campaign has a track record of tangible results: shrinking carbon footprints and educating the members of these congregations about their important role.

While we work hard to enable Vermont congregations to take action at home to reduce their contribution to climate change we also support public programs and policies that remove the barriers and costs of doing the right thing.

We are here today to voice strong support for the carbon pollution tax program. It offers a first important step in the direction of including a measure of differing carbon pollution costs in the price we pay for goods and services, taking a modest step toward aligning market prices with climate costs, and encouraging consumers to reduce purchases that directly or indirectly produce carbon pollution. It provides funds needed to help Vermonters reduce their contribution to global warming and save money while keeping more funds circulating in the Vermont economy. [.....]

WHY

Humanity has long expressed awe for the power and beauty in nature. This is a common experience among those of us blessed by a life in Vermont... perhaps at an overlook along Lake Champlain, from the edge of a farm field, or from a trail in our Green Mountains.

For eons we humans have struggled to survive hoping to prosper in the face of powerful forces of nature. For most of recorded history we have understood poorly the processes that sustain life on our planet.

Modern science enables us to begin to understand the workings of this web of life. With this knowledge comes power... power that increases our capacity to do *good* and to destroy.

We have reduced disease and increased the likelihood that children will survive to lead long lives. Most of this has been made possible because we have learned to tap **huge supplies of energy** stored in fossil fuels by the cycle of life and death on Earth over hundreds of millions of years. Consider for a moment that the average American uses the energy equivalent of 64 barrels of oil per year¹. One analyst estimates that a single barrel of oil contains the energy equivalent of 25,000 hours of human labor, a staggering figure!!

By tapping energy the planet saved up in fossil fuel stores for millions of years, we have experienced rapidly improving living standards. Progress has enabled us to reduce disease, increase likelihood that anyone born into this world will survive. We celebrate these improvements as human progress, hard earned. [.....]

Two potent forces are at work, growing numbers of people on Earth and the natural desire of each of us to improve our material well being.

Today we share the planet with more than 7.2 billion. Two thousand years ago about 200 million people walked the Earth. Global population crested **one billion** only in 1800, as the industrial revolution was just beginning. During the last 50 years we have been adding a billion more people every 12-14 years.

¹ See <http://europe.theoil drum.com/node/4315>

We all need food, homes, medical services and jobs and we know that we also have an appetite for consumer goods and services that often is limited only by our ability to pay. Feeding the appetite of 7 billion people is releasing vast stores of carbon locked within the Earth's crust.

Scientists have long known that burning the Earth's supply of oil, natural gas and coal to power modern society could change global temperatures by releasing vast quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. We now understand better than ever before that all of this carbon in the atmosphere is disrupting the heat balance of our precious little planet, scrambling weather patterns, changing local climate and disrupting ecosystems that have taken shape over thousands of years.

The pace at which these carbon emissions are being released has accelerated. Half the carbon pollution in the atmosphere today is the result of fossil fuel combustion in the last 40 years.

The science is clear. If we continue to mine and burn the oil, coal and natural gas still locked within the Earth, we will elevate the global temperatures to levels not seen in millions of years. We now understand that just burning the known reserves of fossil fuels will create havoc in the environment that sustains human life.

[.....]

It is very tempting to retreat from the challenges posed by climate change because the problems seem too big for any one person, any one spiritual community, or even any one state to address with any significant effect. While the forces of climate change are global, the causes and some of the most effective remedies track back to local action somewhere.

We have power, the power of our love and concern for the Earth and our children's future, and the power of our actions when we work together. We can exercise that power to protect the planet. That power resides in the way we communicate our love for the Earth, in the challenges we tackle, in the goals we pursue, and, perhaps most importantly, in the everyday choices we make.

The Interfaith Power & Light movement is mobilizing congregations and our members to exercise their power to address this crisis. Today we ask you our Vermont State leaders to act, to proceed with developing the carbon pricing program outlined in H.412.

Thank you.