

A conversation with Matt Baker on August 8, 2013

Participants

- Matt Baker – Environment Program Officer, The Hewlett Foundation
- Alexander Berger – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Matt Baker. GiveWell solicited this conversation to explore the claim we had heard elsewhere that nuclear energy and carbon capture and storage (CCS) are important and underfunded by existing climate funders.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Matt Baker about the importance of nuclear energy and carbon capture and storage for reducing carbon emissions, and the role of philanthropy in decarbonizing the energy sector.

Nuclear energy and carbon capture and storage

Nuclear energy and CCS are important options to consider for carbon reduction, and are not getting enough attention from policymakers or the climate movement.

The green community was originally focused on energy, not climate, and within that focus renewable energy is preferable to nuclear power. Historical path dependency has kept the focus on renewable energy, but now it is important to also consider CCS and nuclear power. The electric system is likely to be largely driven by intermittent renewable sources eventually, but getting to that point could take too long to protect the climate, so in the meantime other options are necessary. Furthermore, changing an energy system is difficult – because such systems are built with a focus on reliability and tend to be monopolies – so nuclear energy and CCS are important alternatives for carbon reduction in case renewable energy sources run into challenges.

Because of the huge demand for electricity, decarbonizing the electricity sector will require many approaches. In addition, by increasing the number of possible options for reducing carbon emissions, a broader set of people may be attracted to the climate movement.

Philanthropy

There has been little interest or investment by large-scale philanthropies in nuclear energy or CCS, but that ought to and is likely to change. Mr. Baker is actively working to address this issue.

Conversations about philanthropic strategy tend to happen behind closed doors, due to issues being controversial or lack of public interest. Market mechanisms are largely absent in philanthropy and in the NGO world. The strength in the lack of market discipline is that NGOs and philanthropies can take on longer term projects that entail more risk – like efforts to confront climate change – but a weakness is that accountability can be a problem.

In the absence of public discussion of these ideas, a common mechanism to try to ensure accountability is to hire a consultant to retrospectively assess the strengths and weaknesses of an effort.

Steps forward

Steps to increase funding and attention for nuclear energy and CCS include:

- Popularize the idea that lots of different methods are needed to solve the global warming problem
- Create an innovation agenda that focuses on getting incentives aligned towards innovation and away from rent-seeking
- Take small, concrete steps forward to create space and incentives for nuclear and CCS programs
- Institute broad and easy to understand fuel-neutral policy incentives, such as low carbon fuel standards and generation performance standards
- Create a culture of innovation within utilities specifically, to incentivize research and new thinking

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