

Q & A with FRANCES BEINECKE

Frances Beinecke is the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, the most effective environmental advocacy organization in the world. Headquartered in New York, NRDC has 1.3 million members and activists around the country. Her new book, "Clean Energy Common Sense: An American Call to Action on Global Climate Change," addresses what she calls "the single greatest environmental challenge of our generation."

Here are some questions - and her answers - about the book.

Q. Why do we need another book on climate change, and why now?

A. This is a book of urgency and hope, and it comes at a historic moment. In the 35 years I've spent on the front lines of environmental advocacy, I've never before seen this kind of momentum gathering, in this country and around the world, for action against global climate change.

People understand we have reached a tipping point, that we have to address this problem, and we have to act now. That's why the White House, the Congress, the United Nations, major corporations across the country and literally scores of our friends and partners around the world are working to try to deal with this problem.

They deserve our support. They will need it to prevail. This is the moment, I believe, to speak clearly and directly to the American people, and to tell them the truth about climate change.

Q. And what is the truth?

A. The truth is that we do not need to continue to rely on last century's fuels to power our 21st century economy. We can move forward with energy solutions that will make us more competitive in the world while also greatly reducing climate pollution.

Climate change is hurting our planet. It's hurting our people. Right here. Right now. All over the world. But we have the solutions and we must put them in place now before the consequences get worse.

The good news in this book - and I think this is news to most Americans - is that we can solve this problem. And we can solve it in a way that will make our economy stronger and our country more secure.

People need to understand that. That's why I wrote this book.

Q. NRDC, and other groups, have been calling for action on global warming for quite some time now. What's new about this appeal?

A. Like so many other issues we face, change is hard. The status quo is powerful, both in Washington and around the country. And that makes it hard to get anything done. I understand that.

Our clean energy future, though, is not a partisan issue. It's not an issue that should be pulling us apart. This is something that affects us all. This is something we can all rally around.

We all want to help put Americans back to work. Taking action on climate change can do that.

We all want to reduce our reliance on foreign oil. Taking action on climate change can do that.

We all want to create a healthier future for ourselves and our children, and taking action on climate change can do that too.

This is not a Republican issue or a Democratic issue. This is an American issue. It's an American opportunity. It's a chance for us to work together and lead.

Q. What are we going to learn from this book that we didn't know before?

A. Well, I wonder how many Americans know the CIA formed a new research center in September to assess the national security risks presented by climate change. That's in the book.

I wonder how many Americans know we're losing 8 million acres a year to wildfires - twice the level of just a decade ago.

How many of us realize that we have 15 million Americans out of work - more than at any time since at least the Great Depression - and green technology can get a lot of those folks back on the job?

I wonder how many of us know that some three hundred thousand low-income people died last year around the world due to the effects of climate change, or that tens of millions could be run from their homes over the coming decades by its ravaging consequences?

I wonder how many Americans know we've lost a third of the Arctic ice cap in thirty years. That's in this book.

All of this is documented in this little book, and I think people want to understand this.

Q. There are those who argue, just as strenuously as you're doing, that global warming isn't the problem you suggest it is. They cite eminent scientists and respected institutions. What's your reaction to that?

A. I'm glad you asked that question because this book is my reaction to that.

I've relied here on sources that are not only credible, but definitive. In other words, they're the absolute best sources available anywhere for this information.

So, when we talk about climate change and national security, we quote a four-star Marine Corps general. He knows what he's talking about.

When we say the fifteen hottest years on record have all occurred since 1991, we're relying on hard data compiled by the U.N. World Meteorological Organization. They know what's happening to temperature.

When we say wildfires are consuming 8 million acres a year - twice the rate of just a decade ago - we're quoting from the Quadrennial Fire Review published just this year by the U.S. Forest Service and half a dozen other federal and state agencies. These people know about forest fires.

And when we say we've lost a third of our Arctic sea ice in the past thirty years, we're getting that information from NASA - the people who put a man on the moon. The Pentagon flies a satellite over that ice taking pictures fourteen times a day. We've got thirty years of pictures. The ice is melting. We get fourteen new pictures every single day that prove it.

So if someone wants to take issue with the information chronicled in this book, with the documented disaster unfolding worldwide, with the ecological devastation right before our very eyes, it's important to remember their argument isn't with us. It's with the Pentagon. It's with the U.S. Forest Service. It's with the World Meteorological Organization. It's with the Marines. It's with the people who put a man on the moon.

They're the ones who say we have a problem. And I'm saying in this book, it's time we fixed it.

Q. What do you say to those people who say that climate change is a problem but that it shouldn't be our highest priority, not when we have American men and women dying on the battlefields of two ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and an ongoing struggle with terrorism?

A. Well, clean energy is a national security priority, and no one knows that better than the men and women who wear our uniform.

Right now, every time an American anywhere puts ten gallons of gas in the tank, six are coming from overseas - from places like Venezuela, Russia, Saudi Arabia.

We sent four hundred and fifty billion dollars overseas last year to buy oil.

Half a trillion dollars, in a single year, earned in this country then sent abroad. Half a trillion dollars that will never be used to improve our health care, our factories our schools.

Is that the best thing we can do with half a trillion dollars a year? Does that make us strong and secure?

Our addiction to last century's fuels is putting our military in jeopardy. It is undermining our moral authority abroad. It is entangling us with hostile regimes.

But don't take my word for it. Ask retired U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Dennis McGinn. That's who we quote in the book.

He says that if we care about American strength in the world, if we care about national security, if we care about sending American men and women into harm's way far from home, then we need to do something about our addiction to oil.

We know clean energy legislation can help. And we need to get it passed.

Q. What will taking action mean for our economy and our place in the world?

A. Passing clean energy climate legislation is one of the single best things we can possibly do for the future of our economy.

It can help put Americans back to work. It can generate two million jobs.

It can prepare us to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century by positioning us to compete in the fast-growing global market for clean energy technology.

And it can stop the flow of hundreds of billions of dollars a year out of our economy to pay the tab for imported oil.

So that's a winner all around.

And taking the steps we all know we need to take to create a clean and sustainable energy future will show the world once again that this country has the political will to do the difficult things great nations have to do.

It will show that we're ready once more to lead.

That's something this country knows how to do.

Q. It's looking less likely that there will be a global agreement when the United Nations convenes its climate change summit this December in Copenhagen. What do you think will be accomplished in Copenhagen?

A. Well, first let's all go to Copenhagen, see how much we can accomplish, and then decide how things turned out.

Already, though, Copenhagen has provided tremendous momentum for dealing with this problem. It has focused world attention, at the head-of-state level, on this issue like never before.

We understand far more about the problem than we did when we negotiated the Kyoto agreement we're now working to replace. We certainly have better solutions available to us - better technology, a more comprehensive global consensus, much closer cooperation, for example, among countries like the United States, India and China.

So Copenhagen will provide us the opportunity to build on that momentum, consolidate the gains we've made, convert consensus into shared goals and refocus leaders everywhere on the urgent need to take the action needed to attain those goals.

That is, any way you cut it, an ambitious agenda for a summit of any kind. If we are able to accomplish that in December, then I think Copenhagen will have to be judged a tremendous success.

Q. The legislation the House passed in June is now pending before the Senate. It would set a cap on the amount of carbon pollution that can be released into the atmosphere and create a market for limiting carbon emissions. Your critics say this so-called "cap and trade" system is just a fancy new term for government intervention. Is it?

A. Cap and trade is not a new idea. We've used it before and it's been a success. Remember acid rain? A cap-and-trade system solved the problem. And lead in gasoline? That's right. A cap-and-trade system phased out lead in gasoline.

Opponents of those plans said they would be costly, cumbersome and ineffective, a lot like what foes are saying today about the pending clean energy legislation.

Those skeptics, though, were wrong. The Congressional Budget Office reported in September that the acid rain cap-and-trade program has been a success, reducing sulfur emissions far more effectively than even the plan's proponents had envisioned at a cost that was below expectations.

The fact is, cap and trade is tried and true. It works. And we need to put a stop to the carbon pollution that is ravaging our planet.

Q. But, your critics claim cap and trade runs counter to free market principles?

A. That's complete nonsense.

Cap and trade works precisely because it holds polluters accountable. It sends clear messages to Wall Street and corporate leaders about the premium we place on clean air, pure water and a healthy planet. And it gives consumers the chance to weigh in on that every time they spend their money.

Free enterprise means free choice. And for consumers to choose, we need to know how much something costs. Pollution is a cost. We need to treat it that way. That's the essence of free enterprise.

Q. But your opponents claim this legislation is a job killer.

A. Clean energy legislation can help us create 1.9 million new jobs in this country. Good jobs, in green technology with a promising future. American jobs that can't be outsourced or shipped overseas.

I believe in our workers, because I've gone out and talked to them - steel workers in Indiana, machinists in Ohio, glass fabricators in Pennsylvania - carpenters, electricians, tool and die makers, computer technicians, software engineers - people who work with their hands and their minds.

These workers can compete with the best in the world. All they ask for is a level playing field and the tools to do the job.

Clean energy legislation gives them those tools. It's a vote of confidence in the American worker at a time when they're beginning to get back on their feet. This isn't the time to pull the rug out from under them.

Q. But the National Association of Manufacturers says this legislation will lead to more lay-offs. Don't they know what they're talking about?

A. We all want our factory owners to succeed. But the fact is, these folks have laid off five and a half million American workers in just the past ten years. Five and a half million jobs - gone. Downsized. Outsourced. Shipped overseas, while factory after factory is padlocked coast to coast.

Now these same people are trying to stand in the way of good legislation that can help put Americans back to work when we need the jobs the most. We can't let them get away with it. Our families are too important for that. Our future is too important for that.

Q. The American Petroleum Institute says this bill would drive up gasoline prices. What do you say to that?

A. How? This legislation would reduce oil consumption in this country by up to six million barrels a day. That's substantial. That's a game-changer. And if I'm remembering my ninth-grade economics correctly, prices go down when consumption falls.

Now, you can draw your own conclusions as to whether the association that represents Exxon-Mobil and the other big oil companies wants to see demand drop and prices fall with it. I think most Americans can figure that one out.

But we all remember that last year, when American workers were staggering into the jaws of the worst recession since World War Two, Exxon made record profits - record profits - of forty-five billion dollars, while American families paid four dollars a gallon at the pump during summer vacation.

The fact is, this country needs to end its addiction to oil.

Jimmy Carter said it. Bill Clinton said it. Even George Bush said it. Now Barack Obama has said it.

And when presidents as different as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, George Bush and Barack Obama all agree on a single goal, I think the rest of us ought to get behind it. Clean energy legislation gives us a chance to do that.

Q. So this won't raise our energy prices?

A. Clean energy legislation would cost the average American household \$160 a year in 2020, or right at 44 cents a day, according to the Congressional Budget Office. The Environmental Protection Agency puts

the cost at 30 cents a day. And the Department of Energy estimates the cost at 23 cents a day.

Any way you slice it, we're going to put Americans back to work, reduce our reliance on foreign oil and create a healthier future for ourselves and our children for less than 50 cents a day. If there's a better bargain out there for our families and our country, I'd love to know about it.

Q. We're watching how powerful special interests can manipulate legislative process. What makes you think that same thing won't happen to the clean energy legislation.

A. We can't let ourselves be afraid to take on big challenges. That's not our history. That's not who we are. That's not what this country is all about.

We know what it will take to reduce our carbon emissions, clean up our factories and stop polluting our skies. We've done this kind of thing before.

We cleaned up our waters forty years ago when rivers were catching on fire. We passed the Clean Air Act. We got lead out of our gasoline. We put a stop to acid rain.

And we can curb the pollution that is warming our planet. We simply have to summon the political will to do it.

That takes leadership. And for the first time, we're getting that from the White House on down. This president has moved at warp speed to put climate change near the top of the agenda. He's moved in Congress. He's moved with regulations. He's moved internationally.

We are going to get clean energy legislation in this country - if not in the next few weeks, then certainly in the coming months. I'm confident of that.

We are going to make our economy stronger and our country more secure. We are going to create a healthier planet for ourselves and our children.

And we are going to show the world what it means to lead.