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From a “Green Farce” to a Green Future

Refuting False Claims About Immigrants and the Environment

Jorge Madrid October 2010



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Introduction and summary

Combating climate change and reforming our broken immigration system are two of the greatest challenges facing Congress and the Obama administration. Legislation to address these issues has come up short thus far. Both have been fiercely debated throughout the country and many Americans demand solutions.

In the midst of these debates anti-immigrant groups are revamping their efforts to play these issues against each other using misinformation. These voices have long argued that immigrants destroy the environment, accelerate climate change, and undermine U.S. efforts to transition to a clean and green future.

Nativist organizations and hate groups are attempting to drive their political agenda using environmental concerns as a cover. And conservative lawmakers and opponents of clean energy and climate legislation who use phony environmental arguments as a political wedge are promoting these groups' talking points.

These arguments are a “green farce.” They’re supposedly presented out of concern for the environment but are intentionally misleading and dangerously misinformed. They present Americans with a false choice between achieving fair and humane immigration reform and climate legislation that will respect the environment and lead our country to a clean and prosperous energy future.

Immigrants should not be blamed for the nation’s climate woes. In fact, they deserve better recognition for the valuable contributions they make toward a “greener” society and economy.

Environmentalists and advocates of the green economy must reject false choices and distractions from the greater imperative to fight the true causes of pollution and climate change: our dependence on fossil fuels and our unsustainable systems of energy consumption.

This report strikes down many of the false arguments regarding immigrants and the environment, provides a clearer picture of immigrants' environmental contributions, and outlines real environmental solutions that can cut carbon and curb climate change. Key findings include:

- The assumption that immigrant-driven population growth alone drives the U.S. carbon footprint is false. The 10 highest carbon-emitting cities have an average immigrant population below 5 percent, according to a 2008 Brookings Institution study.
- The cities with the lowest carbon footprint, on the other hand, have an average immigrant population of 26 percent.
- Immigrants, especially recent immigrants, tend to lead “greener” lifestyles than the native-born and are more likely to use public transportation and practice sustainable habits like compact living, conservation, and recycling.
- Immigrants, who are largely low income, are also more likely to have their lives disrupted by extreme weather events and other adverse effects of climate change.
- Addressing climate change and poverty on a global scale will help stabilize immigration flows from undeveloped countries.
- Immigrants are disproportionately hurt by the dirty energy economy and face unique environmental challenges. Consequently, they fight for greener solutions, including challenging the use of hazardous pesticides in the agricultural fields where many immigrants work. A successful campaign by immigrant farm workers during the 1960s led to the banning of the dangerous pesticide DDT.
- 2010 polls of key electoral states find that immigrant-rich communities overwhelmingly favor policy that will create green jobs and tend to support congressional candidates who back efforts to fight global warming.
- Immigrants are integral to driving clean energy innovation. They accounted for 70 percent of men and women who entered the engineering and science fields from 1995 to 2006 and 40 percent of all high-tech venture-backed companies.

Instead of blaming immigrants, the report recommends the following actions the United States and other countries can take to start cutting pollution and getting a handle on climate change:

- Get more energy efficient. A national energy efficiency standard—which would set mandatory annual electricity and natural gas consumption reduction targets for utilities—can save 262 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. That’s the equivalent of taking 48 million cars off the roads for one year and saving 390 power plants from being built.
- Expand renewable energy. Renewable sources of energy such as the wind, sun, and waves have practically zero GHG emissions. Remarkably, only 7 percent of our current national energy portfolio comes from renewable sources, not counting hydroelectric power. A good start for the United States would be to set a national standard of 25 percent of energy produced to come from renewable sources by 2025.
- Curb deforestation. Tropical deforestation is responsible for more emissions than all the cars, trucks, planes, and ships in the world combined. The United States—along with the rest of the world—must transition to more sustainable building materials and enact legislation that protects forests.
- Limit fossil fuels. We can end our addiction to oil through reasonable and cost-effective policies. These include improved fuel economy standards, development of advanced bio-fuels, incentives for nonpolluting electric vehicles, and use of natural gas, which produces fewer emissions than other fossil fuels. Older coal-fired power plants can be retired with national energy efficiency and renewable energy standards, and we can use advanced battery storage and cleaner-burning natural gas for our fail-safe power.
- Plan smart cities. Elements of smart cities, also referred to as “smart growth,” include widely available mass transit and walking-bicycle paths (to curb vehicle travel), compact residential and commercial development (to curb overuse of open space), and efficient use of electricity and water through networked resource management, also called a “smart grid.”

Nearly all credible environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, have rejected bogus arguments about immigrants and climate change. But fringe organizations continue to cloud our national discussions about immigration reform and clean energy. It’s time to set the record straight.

Green farce arguments exposed

Below are some of the most common fallacies spewed by immigration opponents. They distract from identifying both problems and solutions to U.S. environmental challenges.

More people do not necessarily equal more problems

A classic green farce argument against immigrants typically sounds like this: The more people added to a society, the more taxing it will be on natural resources, resulting in increased environmental destruction. This is usually followed by a typical green farce solution: fewer people.

This argument may sound reasonable, but the relationship described above is grossly oversimplified.

The reality is that our environmental impact is not just determined by our numbers, but how we use resources—how we produce and consume energy, and what policies we put in place to shape these decisions.

It's a matter of consumption

A large number of people can have a relatively modest impact on the environment. Conversely, a smaller group of people can have a significantly more harmful impact. This peculiar relationship has to do with our individual consumption levels, or per capita consumption. Large per capita consumption is associated with increased levels of wealth and development, particularly in the United States and other rapidly industrializing nations.

High consumption leads to increased greenhouse gas emissions, or GHGs, in addition to increased waste pollution. The scientific community overwhelmingly considers the release of GHGs into the air to be the main cause of climate change.

The United States is a prime example of a relatively small number of people doing a very large amount of damage. The United States has about 5 percent of the world’s population, but it’s the world’s largest consumer of petroleum (22 percent), the second largest consumer of the world’s coal (15 percent), and produces 25 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. It produces 70 percent more greenhouse gasses than the European nations of EU15 even though it has 23 percent less people.

Population numbers affect emissions but consumption is by far the greater factor. Moreover, viewing population in such all-or-nothing terms does little to advance understanding—or action—on this important issue.

Immigrants’ carbon footprint is low

Another argument opponents like to cite is that immigrants are wasteful and harm the environment. But a closer look shows the evidence contradicts this, too.

Immigrants live in cities with lower per-person emissions

Cities with large immigrant populations do not have the highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Los Angeles, a city with an immigrant population of over 40 percent, had the second-lightest per capita carbon footprint in the United States according to a 2008 Brookings study. The fourth lightest, New York City, has an immigrant population of 36 percent.

At the same time, the 10 cities in Brookings’ study with the highest per capita emissions have immigrant populations averaging 5.1 percent.

“Residential density and the availability of public transit” are two of the chief reasons for a city’s low per capita footprint, according to the Brookings report. These characteristics are commonly found in large cities and immigrant-rich neighborhoods.

TABLE 1
Cities with high immigrant populations are low polluters

Carbon per person and immigrant population, by city

Lowest emitters (city)	Carbon per person	Immigrant population (%)*
Honolulu, HI	1.35	<u>25</u>
Los Angeles, CA	1.41	<u>41</u>
Portland, OR	1.44	<u>13</u>
New York, NY	1.49	<u>36</u>
Boise, ID	1.50	<u>5</u>
Seattle, WA	1.55	<u>17</u>
San Jose, CA	1.57	<u>37</u>
San Francisco, CA	1.58	<u>37</u>
El Paso, TX	1.61	<u>26</u>
San Diego, CA	1.63	<u>26</u>

*2000 U.S. Census

TABLE 2
Cities with high carbon emissions have low immigrant populations

Carbon per person and immigrant population, by city

Highest emitters (city)	Carbon per person	Immigrant population (%)*
Knoxville, TN	3.13	<u>3</u>
Harrisburg, PA	3.19	<u>5.8</u>
Oklahoma City, OK	3.20	<u>8.5</u>
St. Louis, MO	3.22	<u>5.6</u>
Nashville, TN	3.22	<u>7.1</u>
Louisville, KY	3.23	<u>3.8</u>
Toledo, OH	3.24	<u>3</u>
Cincinnati, OH	3.28	<u>3.8</u>
Indianapolis, IN	3.36	<u>4.6</u>
Lexington-Fayette, KY	3.46	<u>5.9</u>

*2000 U.S. Census

As it turns out, immigrants are actually helping cities lower their carbon footprint.

Immigrants commute green

Data show a higher percentage of immigrants versus nonimmigrants use alternative transportation and commute greener.

When immigrants use alternative transport there are fewer vehicles on the road, which in turn means less GHGs and less traffic. These populations also model good behavior for sustainable transit habits.

Immigrants live in compact cities

Another Brookings [study](#) notes that more than half of all U.S. immigrants live in high-density, large metropolitan cities and suburbs. This tendency among immigrants toward high-density, low-carbon living has also been noted by leading demographer [Dowell Myers](#) who writes that Latinos, who comprise the largest immigrant group in the United States, “lead lifestyles compatible with compact cities ... occupy fewer housing units and are twice as likely to commute via public transit, bicycle, or carpool.”

Finally, it’s less frequently reported that immigrant communities practice sustainable living habits like [organic farming](#) and [recycling](#), illustrating lessons that all Americans can learn about living greener.

Immigrants don’t cause sprawl

Yet another green farce argument that fits well into the “overpopulation by immigrants” narrative is that immigrants cause urban sprawl. The growing U.S. population is often cited as a major cause of unchecked and destructive suburban expansion. Again, this is a short-sighted and dangerously misleading argument. Immigrants do not cause sprawl—generations of national land-use policies and unsustainable development practices do.

TABLE 3
Higher percentages of immigrants vs. nonimmigrants use alternative transportation

Percentages of immigrants and nonimmigrants who commute daily using bus, subway, bicycle, walking, and carpooling

Daily commute via	Immigrant	Nonimmigrant
Bus	5.7%	2.1%
Subway or train	4.1%	1.2%
Bicycle*	1.3%	.45%
Walking	3.7%	2.7%
Carpool	27%	11.2%

Source: 2007 American Community Survey, U.S. Census
*New immigrants since 2000

America undoubtedly needs to combat uncontrolled urban sprawl, which destroys open space, wetlands, and farmland to develop single-family tract homes, retail superstores with expansive parking lots, and suburban amenities like golf courses. The United States loses 365 acres of open space every hour to this kind of development. Additionally, unbridled sprawl affects the quality and supply of water and encourages an overreliance on automobiles.

But immigrants aren't at fault here. Urban sprawl is the result of longstanding intentional national land use policy. In the post-WWII "baby boomer" period the federal government offered incentives for homeownership and movement away from downtown and the urban core. Legislation like the federal mortgage loan program of 1949 coupled with various GI incentives for returning soldiers made buying a house affordable and moving to the suburbs an attractive reality.

Furthering this movement away from cities was the Highway Act of 1956, which helped create 45,000 miles of superhighway networks that allowed people to live farther away from jobs and retail. It made automobile travel a common benchmark of suburban living. Local and regional policies followed suit, and the United States soon found itself with vast expanses of paved suburbia.

We now know that this kind of development is unsustainable. To fix these problems we need to reconsider how local, regional, and federal land-use policy affects development and the environment. Blaming immigrants takes attention away from the real issue. As already noted, immigrants overwhelmingly tend to live in city centers. Pointing the finger at them for policies that existed before they arrived is wrong.

Global warming needs global solutions

Climate change is a global issue and fighting its effects will require bold action and partnership on a global scale. These threats will not be solved with insulated policy action against immigrants. Further, curbing climate change and global poverty with sustainable development will help relieve immigration flows to the United States—not the other way around.

The Economist puts it best: "There is no such thing as American warming. ... and the world will be utterly unable to solve its significant environmental challenges so long as problems of global importance are viewed through a narrowly nationalistic lens."

Nonetheless, a darling statistic of the anti-immigrant green farce movement is that immigrant consumption levels—and the resulting carbon footprint of greenhouse gases—increase four times over what they would have been had immigrants stayed in their countries of origin. Underlying message: “Stay home and warm your own country. We’ll be just fine on our own.” This is false, wrong, and dangerous.

The reason that many immigrants consume less energy in their own countries is that in these countries electricity and fuel are simply not available to huge swaths of the population. Additionally, poor people—again, the majority of immigrants are low income and many lived in poverty prior to immigrating—consume less and pollute less. So the anti-immigrant green farce argument is essentially that poor people should stay poor and continue to lack basic access to energy.

This argument is morally unsound and ignores a real national security issue. Poverty in undeveloped countries is often associated with civil instability, disease, and the rise of totalitarian dictatorships—all of which contribute to increased immigration to more developed and politically stable countries like the United States (see El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Cuba in the 1980s and 1990s).

Scathing poverty in undeveloped countries is also linked to higher birthrates and climate migration. Last year more than 20 million people fled regions due to severe weather events related to climate change. That’s because poor countries and their inhabitants are ill equipped to handle rising sea levels, floods, droughts that destroy crops and homes, increased pestilence, loss of wildlife habitat, and extreme weather conditions.

As these events continue climate refugees will be forced out of their homes and likely seek shelter in more developed areas better equipped to handle climate impacts. Studies show that climate refugees will increase global migration by 1 billion people by 2050 on our current trajectory of business as usual.

Likewise, the Department of Defense has asserted that climate change is an “accelerant of instability” and numerous decorated generals consider it a “threat multiplier” that could contribute to instability and increased migration.

Higher birthrates and increased migration are the antithesis of the green farce movement and completely contradict their own goals. These are the end results of an illogical, short-sighted, and irresponsible argument.

Instead of calling for sealed-up borders environmental advocates should be calling for access to reproductive education, health programs, and solutions to global poverty.

Greenhouse gases don't stop at the border

What about a world where poor countries do not remain poor—where birthrates and climate migration are curbed? What if we help these countries develop so they are no longer poor and populous? This scenario is also problematic if not approached correctly.

Last year developing nations such as China and India produced 53 percent of global carbon emissions. This was largely due to their use of rapid and unsustainable development practices such as burning fossil fuels, scaling back emission regulations, and engaging in unregulated carbon-intensive activities such as chemical and cement production. It should also be noted that nearly 10 percent of China's emissions were from manufacturing and exporting products to the United States.

If developing countries follow the same path as the United States and other industrialized nations—with large and unchecked GHG emissions—it could prove disastrous for the planet. Moreover, GHGs and climate change do not respect international borders, and all countries will feel their effects. The rapid development needed to alleviate global poverty will devastate the environment if business as usual is maintained.

The overpopulation and “let them stay home” arguments suggest that climate change and global poverty are insulated issues that exist within territorial borders. Green farce proponents claim that sealing our borders will help our country solve its own environmental problems, and we should leave other countries to contend with theirs. This is a dangerous fallacy because, again, it distracts from the bigger issue. Climate change affects all countries indiscriminate of high and low emitters.

It's unjust to scapegoat immigrants for the environmental challenges we ourselves created and then prescribe anti-immigrant policy as a solution. We should instead support global solutions: financing more low-carbon energy projects in developing countries; attacking the real causes of climate change (discussed later in the report); and helping the United States become a leader in the fight against it.

Immigrants and the fight against climate change

This section details the unique environmental challenges that immigrants in the United States face, their lesser-known fight against pollution and environmental injustice, and their role in supporting green policy and driving the green economy.

Immigrants regularly weather environmental dangers

Immigrants are disproportionately exposed to many environmental hazards, especially in their communities and workplaces. As a result they've effectively fought for their environmental survival for generations.

Immigrants have just as much at stake as other Americans in the fight to curb climate change. Often, immigrants are poor and less able to cope with long heat waves and harsh winters, high utility bills due to extreme weather, flood, drought, and catastrophic climate events.

For instance, an estimated 300,000 immigrants lived in areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Many of them were undocumented Latino immigrants. In the aftermath undocumented immigrants could not get temporary homes, subsidies, Social Security checks, or mail delivery promised to legal residents displaced by Katrina.

This past summer, the Deepwater Horizon oil drilling rig explosion—the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history—decimated the lives of countless black, Latino, and Vietnamese immigrants in the Gulf of Mexico. Nevertheless, immigrants rose in support of this country and are risking their health in cleanup efforts. Sadly, local authorities have racially profiled and intimidated these immigrants.

At risk at home and at work

Immigrants are more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards in their communities. A 2007 [study](#) of California's Bay Area found that *immigrants* are nearly *twice as likely to live within one mile of a Toxic Release Inventory, or TRI, facility* that the Environmental Protection Agency tracks. The same study noted that recent immigrants (1980 and later) have the highest risk of cancer and respiratory illnesses from pollutant exposure in their communities.

Immigrants are also prone to encounter hazardous work conditions because they traditionally work jobs native-born workers find undesirable. Eighty-five percent of agricultural field workers are immigrants, for example, which makes them more likely to be exposed to toxic pesticides and contaminated drinking water. This exposure, in turn, increases their risks of cancer and Parkinson's disease, and presents numerous hazards for their children, including attention deficit disorder and birth defects.

Almost half a century ago immigrants were one of the first communities to protest the use of harmful pesticides on fruits and vegetables. An alliance of immigrant and nonimmigrant laborers in the United Farm Workers Union, or UFW, laid the groundwork for a collective bargaining agreement in 1966 that included banning the particularly harmful pesticide DDT. Immigrants bolstered the national outcry over the use of harmful pesticides initiated by the iconic 1962 environmental call to action *Silent Spring*, which is often cited as the book that inspired the modern environmental movement. (Unbeknownst to many is the fact that immigrants were also foot soldiers in this fight.)

Immigrant workers, mothers, fathers, and children have a strong tradition of seeking eco-friendly solutions and engaging in environmental activism precisely because they have to deal with disproportionate degrees of environmental injustice and the effects of climate change. Further, they understand that safeguarding the planet will protect their children and families from serious health hazards.

Immigrants support green policy

Immigrants strongly support comprehensive climate and energy legislation and they are engaging in environmental advocacy in their own communities. Latinos, for example, represent more than half of the total U.S. immigrant population. They

overwhelmingly support fighting climate change and global warming as well as policies that will reinvigorate our economy by creating green jobs.

A 2010 [study](#) by the National Latino Coalition on Climate Change finds that:

- Overwhelming majorities of Latino voters in Florida (80 percent), Nevada (67 percent), and Colorado (58 percent) say they are more likely to vote for a Senate candidate who supports proposals for fighting global warming.
- About three out of four Latino voters in Florida (76 percent) and Nevada (74 percent) and about two out of three Latino voters in Colorado (64 percent) consider global warming very or somewhat serious. Three out of four Latino voters in each state surveyed say Congress should take action now.
- Latino voters in Florida, Nevada, and Colorado say by about three to one that switching to a clean energy economy will mean more U.S. jobs (66 percent in Florida, 72 percent in Nevada, and 64 percent in Colorado). More than 8 out of 10 Latino voters in each state reject the idea that fighting global warming will hurt the American economy.

Immigrants can help drive the green economy

Our economy needs to run on clean energy and nonpolluting products to tackle climate change. Likewise, transitioning to a clean energy economy can also drive economic growth. Clean energy industries are experiencing [substantial growth](#) in the midst of a potent and persistent recession. They're creating jobs and cutting pollution while our planet and pocketbooks are in peril.

Immigrants are already helping drive the green economy. They can help the United States become a leader in this sector through science and innovation, green entrepreneurship, and green-collar jobs.

Science and innovation

A clean energy economy relies on the expansion of cutting-edge technology and continued scientific advancement. Consequently, the United States will need a ready corps of highly trained, highly skilled scientists and engineers that can

perform the research and development necessary for sustained innovation of clean technology, products, and services.

We also need to train future engineers and scientists in this area to remain globally competitive. By 2020, for example, clean energy will be one of the world's biggest industries, totaling as much as \$2.3 trillion. Rising nations such as China are making substantial investments in clean energy research and capacity building, and the United States risks falling behind other countries and losing out on a share of this large, emerging sector.

Fortunately we've got the personnel we need to drive the green economy and sustain high-tech innovation. A 2010 Immigration Policy Center study finds that immigrants, while accounting for 12 percent of the U.S. population, make up nearly half of all scientists and engineers with doctorate degrees. This same study notes that nearly 70 percent of the men and women who entered the science and engineering fields from 1995 to 2006 were immigrants.

The study's authors rightfully observe: "America's young scientists and engineers, especially the ones drawn to emerging industries like alternative energy, tend to speak with an accent."

Green entrepreneurs

Google founder Sergey Brin, Intel founder Andrew Grove, and Yahoo! founder Jerry Yang are three of the more famous immigrant entrepreneurs in this country. But they're certainly not alone. Immigrant entrepreneurs are some of the most powerful economic engines for our country, and they will continue to establish innovative companies that drive economic growth, create jobs, boost tax revenue, and help the United States become a leader in the global green economy.

The National Venture Capital Association recently found that immigrants launched 40 percent of U.S. publicly traded venture-backed companies operating in high-technology manufacturing. Likewise nearly half of today's private venture-backed startups have immigrant founders. Seventy percent of the more than 400,000 jobs created by immigrant-founded, venture-backed public companies are in the high-tech manufacturing sector.

Another [study](#) by the Center for Urban Future found that first-generation immigrants founded 22 of Los Angeles's 100 fastest-growing companies, and in New York City immigrants comprise nearly half of all self-employed workers.

Also, for every high-skilled (H-1B) immigrant worker hired in this country at least five new jobs are created, according to a [study](#) by the National Foundation for American Policy.

Yang, whose company is worth close to \$40 billion, makes a compelling case for [immigrant entrepreneurs](#): “Yahoo! would not be an American company today if the United States had not welcomed my family and me almost 30 years ago.”

Green-collar workers

Not all jobs in the green economy will be high tech, however. Some will be “green-collar jobs,” which leading organizations like the Apollo Alliance and Green for All define as similar to blue-collar jobs but directly contributing to preserving or enhancing environmental quality. These green-collar workers will implement new technologies and best practices in the green economy.

Traditional jobs in the construction, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors are being retooled to produce clean energy, alternative fuels, sustainable agriculture and bio-energy, clean technology manufacturing, and much more. These industries will need more workers as federal mandates are put in place and consumer demand increases for more energy efficient homes, renewable energy sources such as solar panels and wind turbines, and alternative fuel vehicles.

Many immigrants already work in potential green-collar jobs. They comprise 73 percent of landscapers, 51 percent of office cleaners, and 43 percent of construction workers in the greater Washington, D.C., area, for example, according to a [study](#) by the Pew Center.

Green-collar workers are on the front lines of fighting pollution and climate change by advancing the use of clean energy and environmentally friendly products and practices. They will be responsible for making the wind turbines and solar panels to power the nation with clean energy, using eco-friendly products and cleaners in our businesses and homes, growing our food and bio-products in organic and sustainable ways, and implementing water-saving vegetation and landscaping to green our communities.

We need leadership and solutions, not scapegoats

To reiterate: The United States will only reach meaningful cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and curb the effects of climate change through global partnerships. The United States, as the world's highest emitter of GHGs, must lead by example and not be distracted by those who want to create a political wedge between the environmental community and advocates of sensible comprehensive immigration reform. Caving into such tactics hinders our path to a clean and green future and diminishes our standing as a global leader.

The facts lost in anti-immigrant green farce arguments are critical, and they need to be understood and addressed. For instance:

- Thirty-eight percent of U.S. GHG emissions come from buildings.
- Commercial and industrial buildings account for as much as 50 percent of U.S. energy use and residential buildings account for another 20 percent.
- Twenty-nine percent of U.S. GHG emissions come from transportation.
- Seventeen percent of global GHG emissions are caused by deforestation.
- Fifty-seven percent of global GHG emissions are caused by burning fossil fuels.
- The United States meets 85 percent of its energy needs by burning fossil fuels.

How much we consume is definitely a factor in the above figures. And that number is influenced by population and per capita consumption. But more important, these figures represent a problem in *how* we consume—and that relates to our production, consumption, and distribution systems that are polluting and unsustainable.

The United States needs to lead and not scapegoat to solve its own sustainability challenges as well serve as an example for the rest of the developing world. Draconian anti-immigrant policies are not a magic bullet that will set us on the right path.

In short, we must focus on solutions instead of tinkering at the margins with misguided and ill-informed anti-immigrant scapegoating.

What can we do?

Fortunately, the United States and the rest of the world can take numerous meaningful actions to control our pollution and GHG emissions. Below are five major steps forward:

1. Get more energy efficient. The more energy we waste the more we have to produce to meet our needs—and that means more GHGs. A national energy efficiency standard—which would set mandatory annual electricity and natural gas consumption reduction targets for utilities—can save 262 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. That’s the equivalent of taking 48 million cars off the roads for one year and saving 390 power plants from being built.
2. Expand renewable energy. Renewable sources of energy such as the wind, sun, and waves have practically zero GHG emissions. Remarkably, only 7 percent of our current national energy portfolio comes from renewable sources, not counting hydroelectric power. A good start for the United States would be to set a national standard of 25 percent of energy produced to come from renewable sources by 2025.
3. Curb deforestation. Trees act like natural filters that absorb GHGs and release fresh oxygen. Cutting them down has real costs. Tropical deforestation is responsible for more emissions than all the cars, trucks, planes, and ships in the world combined.
4. Limit fossil fuels. We can end our addiction to oil through reasonable and cost-effective policies. These include improved fuel economy standards, development of advanced bio-fuels, incentives for nonpolluting electric vehicles, and use of natural gas, which produces fewer emissions than other fossil fuels. Older coal-fired power plants can be retired with national energy efficiency and renewable energy standards, and we can use advanced battery storage and cleaner-burning natural gas for our fail-safe power.
5. Plan smart cities. Finally, well-planned or smart cities are a vital and often overlooked part of America’s climate solution. Elements of smart cities, also referred to as “smart growth,” include widely available mass transit and walking-bicycle paths (to curb vehicle travel), compact residential and commercial development (to curb overuse of open space), and efficient use of electricity and water through networked resource management, also called a “smart grid.”

Conclusion

More people do not necessarily equal more stress on the planet, and stopping the flow of immigrants to this country will not solve our environmental challenges. Blaming immigrants for climate change is a sham. In fact, immigrants actually live greener than most Americans and they can play a critical role in solving our environmental challenges.

Hate groups and other immigration restrictionists who disguise themselves as environmentalists—who argue for zero net migration, sealing off our borders, and enforcement-only initiatives—must be silenced with the facts to prevent misguided policies and to promote a more reasonable discussion on how to solve our problems.

As the nation moves toward comprehensive reform of the federal immigration system immigrants should be considered allies in the fight against climate change and the march toward green policy. In their roles as entrepreneurs and green-collar workers they are assets in our efforts to revive the economy and implement climate solutions. This country must examine its own unsustainable systems of energy generation and consumption rather than blame immigrants. And it needs to make tough decisions on how to fix these systems.

Our dialogue about sustainability and climate change should focus on real problems and solutions, not fallacies. Freeing the national debate from distractions and political wedges can help the United States lead the global charge toward a cleaner and greener future.

About the author

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