

# Climate-Change Policies Can Treat Poor Families Fairly and Be Fiscally Responsible

The United States can reduce greenhouse-gas emissions in a way that is fiscally responsible and does not increase poverty or otherwise harm low-income households. As part of any global warming legislation, Congress should take steps to protect low-income consumers.

Efficient, effective policies to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions work in part by putting a price on those emissions, thereby ending the free use of the atmosphere to dispose of pollution. This raises prices for fossil-fuel energy products. The higher prices operate as a market signal that encourages investment in energy efficiency and development of cleaner sources of energy.

Higher energy prices affect households with limited incomes the most. They spend a larger share of their budgets on energy than better-off households do. They also are less able to afford investments that can reduce their energy demand, such as a more efficient car or heating and cooling system.

Fortunately, well-designed climate-change policies can provide sufficient revenue to cushion the impact on vulnerable households and meet other legitimate public needs, such as expanded research on alternative energy sources. A “cap-and-trade system” can accomplish these goals—as long as it treats the emission allowances as a resource to be auctioned off for public purposes rather than handed to energy companies free of charge as windfall profits. A carbon tax can accomplish these goals as well.

If policymakers do not adequately protect vulnerable households from the increase in energy prices, many low-income Americans will slip into poverty and those who are already poor will grow poorer. Alternatively, if policymakers address these and other public needs but do so through deficit spending because they fail to auction enough of the emission allowances to cover the costs, the federal budget deficit—already on course to reach unsustainable levels in future decades—will grow still larger.

Well-designed climate-change policies can avoid both of these outcomes. In other words, they can slow global warming *without* increasing poverty and hardship among low-income households and *without* enlarging the deficit.

## I. Protecting Those Most Vulnerable to Rising Energy Prices

Effective climate-change policies (whether a cap-and-trade system or a carbon tax) put a price on dumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Cap-and-trade policies directly limit the amount of carbon dioxide and other global-warming pollutants that power plants, factories, vehicles, and other sources may put into the air. Carbon taxes limit that pollution indirectly by placing a price on each ton of emissions.

Both methods encourage energy efficiency and alternative energy sources. Both also raise the costs of a wide array of products and services, from gasoline and electricity to food, mass transit, and other products or services with significant energy inputs.

That will pose special challenges for low- and moderate-income families, who pay a larger share of their budgets for energy-related costs than higher-income families.

### For Low-Income Families, Added Costs Could Total \$750-950 a Year

Poor and near-poor families will face the biggest challenges. Unless Congress includes adequate measures in climate-change legislation to shield low-income families, even a relatively modest climate-change policy (one aimed at reducing greenhouse-gas emissions by 15 percent) would impose an estimated \$750-\$950 a year in added costs, on average, for a family in the bottom 20 percent of the income spectrum. These households have average incomes modestly over \$13,000.

Climate-change initiatives will also create other important needs, such as assisting workers and communities that depend

on the coal industry and other industries most affected by the shift to a less carbon-intensive economy. In addition, the increase in prices for energy and energy-related products will drive up costs to the federal, state, and local governments of providing many important services and benefits (for instance, the Defense Department is the nation's single largest consumer of energy). Congress should make it a high priority to offset those effects in order to avoid reductions in services or benefits, higher taxes, or an increase in already unsustainable federal budget deficits.

### FIGURE 1: Four Key Numbers on Climate Policy, Low-Income Families, and the Budget

- > **\$750-\$950 per year**  
Average increase in energy-related costs for the poorest fifth of the population from a modest (15 percent) emissions reduction
- > **\$50-\$300 billion per year**  
Resources potentially generated by climate policies to help low-income consumers and address other climate-related needs
- > **Approximately 14%**  
Share of those resources needed to fully offset the increased energy costs faced by low-income consumers
- > **Less than 15%**  
Share of those resources needed to fully compensate energy companies (and other companies) for losses resulting from climate policies

This estimate is based on data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey and methodology developed by the Congressional Budget Office, including CBO methods of estimating the costs to consumers from lowering allowable emissions.

## II. Raising the Needed Revenues

Effective climate-change policies can generate enough revenue to address these needs (see Figure 2).

- Under a cap-and-trade system, the revenues would come from the federal government's auctioning the allowances that energy producers must hold to cover emissions that result from burning fossil fuels.
- Under a carbon tax, the revenues would come from the tax itself, which the federal government would collect from energy producers in proportion to their emissions. (Ultimately, under either system, energy producers will be able to pass along most or all of the cost to consumers.)

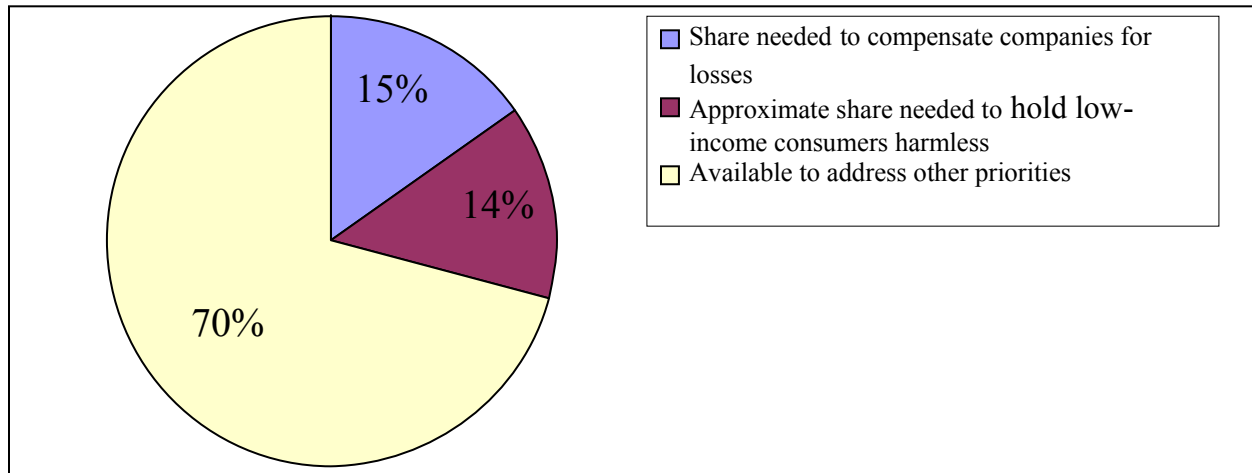
## Policies Could Generate \$50-300 Billion a Year, According to CBO

A cap-and-trade system or carbon tax could raise more than enough money to: offset the effect of higher energy prices on vulnerable households; offset the effects of those price increases on federal, state, and local government budgets; assist the industries, workers, and communities affected by climate-change policies; and address other legitimate claims, such as promoting basic research on alternative energy sources.

A cap-and-trade system could eventually generate \$50 billion to \$300 billion a year, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO). (A carbon tax that reduced greenhouse-gas emissions by comparable amounts would raise comparable amounts of revenue.)

But that won't happen if the government gives away a large percentage of the emission allowances to energy producers *free of charge*. This is a serious risk. Many current cap-and-trade proposals, based in part on misconceptions about how a cap-and-trade system operates (see box), would do just that.

FIGURE 2: Well-Designed Climate Policies Can Generate the Resources Needed to Address Crucial Priorities



- Compensating workers in affected industries
- Investing in alternative energy R&D
- Providing relief to middle-income families
- Offsetting effects on federal, state, and local budgets

Source: Share needed to compensate companies for losses based on estimates cited by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). Share needed to hold low-income consumers harmless reflects CBPP calculations using the Consumer Expenditure Survey, Current Population Survey and CBO methodology.

### Arguments for Giving Away Emission Allowances Don't Hold Up

The argument for giving away a large share of emission allowances for free, rather than auctioning them off, rests on two myths:

**Myth #1: Energy prices won't rise if we give away the emission allowances.** To the contrary, the law of supply and demand explains why energy prices will rise—and by the same amount—whether energy companies have to buy allowances or get them for free. A cap on emissions will limit the amount of energy produced from fossil fuels. Regardless of whether the government gives away or sells the allowances, market forces will raise the price of fossil-fuel energy to the point where the amount demanded will fall to equal the amount supplied. Either way, energy companies will be able to sell their products at the higher price.\*

This is why CBO has emphasized that energy companies will reap multi-billion-dollar windfall profits if they receive many of the allowances free of charge.

**Myth #2: Energy producers need most of the emission allowances to compensate for their losses.** Greenhouse-gas restrictions will affect energy companies' profits and stock-market value by lowering the overall demand for their products. But CBO estimates that, on the whole, companies' net losses would amount to less than 15 percent of the total value of the emission allowances. Thus, giving energy producers more than 15 percent of the allowances would over-compensate them for their potential losses and give them windfall profits.

Those windfall profits, in turn, would be highly regressive, boosting incomes among the (mostly high-income) shareholders of energy companies even as lower-income households struggle to cope with higher energy bills. Under a cap-and-trade system, “giving all or most of the allowances to energy producers ... would exacerbate the regressivity of the price increases” in energy-related products, according to CBO.

\*A partial exception exists where states still regulate electricity rates. There the state regulators may—or may not—disallow rate increases if the

power company gets the allowances for free. Where regulators do disallow rate increases, however, the market signal for cleaner energy would be short-circuited.

### III. Principles for Designing Assistance to Low-Income Consumers

Policymakers need to reserve only an estimated 14 percent of the total value of the emission allowances under a cap-and-trade system to fund “climate rebates” that protect vulnerable households from the effects of higher energy costs. To provide these rebates in a way that is effective and efficient, policymakers should follow several basic principles:

- **Fully protect the most vulnerable households.**  
For households in the bottom fifth of the income spectrum, climate rebates should fully offset the impact of higher energy costs resulting from climate-change legislation. No climate-change legislation should make poor families poorer or push more people into poverty.
- **Use mechanisms that reach all or nearly all low-income households.**  
Some low-income households work for low wages and could receive their climate rebate through the tax code, such as through an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit. But others are elderly, unemployed (especially during recessions), or have serious disabilities. Climate rebates must reach all of them.

Fortunately, policymakers can tap existing mechanisms to reach the large number of low-income households that cannot be reached through a tax rebate mechanism because their incomes are so low they are not required to file a federal income tax return. For example, climate rebates could be provided through the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems that state human service agencies use to provide assistance to many poor people. Policymakers could fill any remaining gaps, and provide weatherization assistance, through relatively modest increases in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

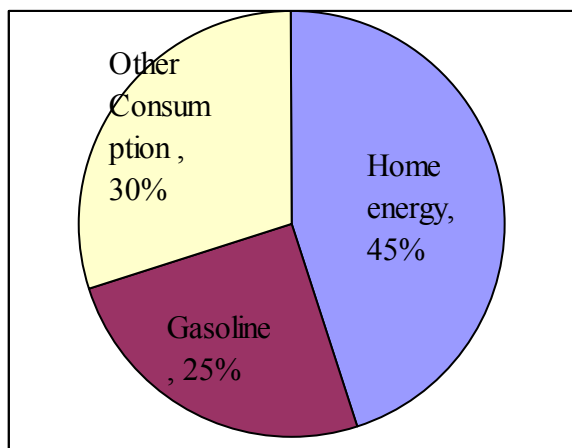
**Minimize red tape.** Funds set aside for climate rebates should go to intended beneficiaries, not to administrative costs or profits. Accordingly, policymakers should provide relief as much as possible through existing, proven delivery mechanisms rather than new public or private bureaucracies.

**Don’t focus solely on utility bills.** For households in the bottom fifth of the population, higher home energy costs will account for less than half of the hit on their budgets from increased energy prices. (See Figure 3.) Policymakers should structure climate rebates so that they can also help low-income families with higher prices for gasoline and other products and services that are sensitive to energy costs.

**Adjust relief to reflect changing needs.** Climate rebates should be smaller when a cap-and-trade system or carbon tax is just phasing in, and larger when the system is fully in place.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is developing policy options based on these principles.

**FIGURE 3: Impact on the Budgets of Low-Income Households Goes Well Beyond Home Energy**



Shares of Cost Increase for Poorest 20 Percent of Population by Product Category

Source: CBPP calculations based on Consumer Expenditure Survey data and CBO methodology.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities  
820 First Street NE, Suite 510  
Washington DC 20002  
(202) 408-1080  
[www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org)