

How does Citizens Climate Lobby look in early 2023?

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I joined Citizens Climate Lobby (CCL, <citizensclimatelobby.org>) in early 2014 and until late 2022 recommended it highly. Now I recommend it with the caution that I hope it will continue doing necessary work. Now I also have a bit less confidence in its officers and some apprehension about one of its new goals.

We need something like CCL to win CF&D

Though CCL has a conservative ideology¹ and a mostly moderate-to-vaguely-liberal membership, it showed a remarkable ability to engage people with a broad range of views in pushing the United States Congress to pass legislation for a carbon fee and dividend (CF&D)².

CF&D maintains capitalism and uses market forces to reform our energy economy. Of the few proposed reforms with a reasonable chance of seriously reducing emission of greenhouse gases, it has the best chance of getting through Congress. The dividend part of CF&D also means the least wealthy 40% of the country would not bear the main cost of our necessary transition.

So I support a strong, increasing CF&D as a valuable short-term reform and have supported CCL as our best vehicle for winning CF&D.

Until late 2022, CCL served well as an advocacy group to win CF&D from national governments. It made noticeable progress toward persuading members of the United States Congress. It used effective methods in working toward that goal. I wish it had kept that focus.

In late 2022, CCL changed course

However, in late 2022 CCL replaced its single goal of winning CF&D with four broad categories of goals: “Price on carbon” (which appears to include CF&D), “Healthy forests”, “Building electrification and efficiency”, and “Clean energy permitting reform”.

¹ CCL has a conservative ideology. For example, it supports capitalism and a market economy. It speaks of our current society as basically good and just needing minor adjustments in policy like CF&D. It speaks of markets as neutral, efficient, and necessary. It even sometimes uses the rhetoric of US exceptionalism.

² A carbon fee (the CF of CF&D) charges a fee to companies when they extract fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas) from the ground or import them across the country’s border. A carbon dividend (the D of CF&D) sends those fees in equal monthly shares to everybody (in most proposals only to citizens and legal residents) in the country. A fee that increases fast enough will make carbon fuels unaffordable. The dividend covers the resulting rise in costs for recipients who do not use excessive amounts of fossil fuel. If, for example, you heat a swimming pool, cool multiple mansions, or use a private jet, the dividend probably won’t cover your increased costs. CCL’s website explains CF&D fairly well, though the first explanations you find there oversimplify it. In something like CF&D, the details matter. For example, a CF&D bill <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2307>> CCL supported taxes petroleum fuels as they leave the refineries instead of at the well. I assume they did this to only tax fuel and avoid taxing non-fuel products like asphalt and feedstock for plastics, uses that might not release much greenhouse gas. The bill also exempts fuel for agriculture and the US military. I would rather not exempt those two gigantic categories. Probably the bill sponsors thought those exemptions necessary to gain support for the bill.

This expansion of goals may dilute CCL's effectiveness. It also threatens to de-emphasize³ the dividend as a way to (at least partially) protect non-wealthy people from harm caused by rising fossil fuel prices. This change looks like a severe strategic error.⁴ CCL's extremely limited internal debate about this change — basically just among top staff — may have contributed to this error. (CCL doesn't claim to make decisions democratically.)

CCL deserves support; it will not suffice

Even before this mistaken de-focus, CCL's efforts — while necessary and deserving our support — appeared unlikely to suffice. By itself, the likelihood of CCL achieving CF&D (or anything similar) soon enough and in a sufficiently strong form appears extremely low.

CCL bases its methods on those designed by Sam Daley-Harris for Results <<https://results.org/>>. At the time of CCL's founding, Results used its methods to ask Congress to provide more anti-hunger (later broadened to anti-poverty) foreign aid. Results' methods worked reasonably well for its goal. But Results' goal does not eliminate a major industry (as successful CF&D would)! Results' goal even helps the interests of United States agribusiness because much of US foreign food aid requires recipient countries to buy food from US companies. CF&D faces an entirely different level of opposition.

CCL alone cannot move Congress to pass CF&D. It will succeed only when Congress sees CF&D as a less-objectionable option that lets them avoid something worse to them. We can build a threat of something worse by implementing nonviolent action campaigns like those proposed in the series of Strategy Notes beginning with Strategy Note 201 <<https://organizenorthcarolina.org/strategynotes.php#SN201>>.

“Reform” of permitting regulations

Possibly even worse than CCL's de-focus, its adoption of “permitting reform⁵” may have severely unhelpful results. CCL's officers believe we need many new large centralized non-emitting electricity sources (for example, wind and solar “farms” and nuclear plants — so-called “utility-scale” sources) and transmission lines to carry electricity from those mostly-rural sources to mostly-urban consumers. They also believe current permitting processes will not allow businesses to build such sources and lines as fast as necessary.

We may need to build *some* big centralized renewable sources and transmission lines from them, but we should not just enlarge the old centralized (and therefore brittle) electric grid structure. Instead, we should move as rapidly as possible to a continent-wide network of microgrids which produce most of their electricity from local, highly distributed renewable sources (for example, rooftop solar with local energy storage). Microgrids offer far more resilience than big centralized systems. Microgrids also offer the possibility of local democratic control.

³ CCL has clearly and consistently called for a price on carbon. They clearly welcome a dividend but appear to see it as an optional element that might help pass the fee but that they could abandon if it became a hindrance. I see the dividend as an almost-essential element of justice to protect the people who have done the least to harm our climate.

⁴ CCL's change illustrates a larger principle: Organizations can change. We should think of them (especially the non-democratic ones) as tools we wield when they serve our purposes. When they don't serve our goals, we lay them down. Don't tattoo yourself with an organization's logo.

⁵ CCL has not specified what changes they want in the permitting processes. They just say they want to make it easier and faster to build clean energy projects. Many devils could inhabit the details.

CCL's new goal of opening the current permitting processes to "reform" risks losing our current meagre protection for our environment and communities. We've seen far too much destruction caused by big-money centralized "utility-scale" energy projects. Lobbyists for fossil energy businesses and giant utilities will swarm that "reform" discussion to skew permitting regulations even farther in their favor. Those drafting debates will mostly decide the devilish details that determine who benefits and who suffers from permitting "reform".

In a few cases, wealthy people have used current permitting policies to oppose solar panels, wind turbines, and transmission lines because they think those projects unsightly. We generally should support amending permitting policies to give "viewshed" protection a much lower priority than protecting human health.

It might make sense for CCL to build relationships with people across the country who struggle to defend their homes from massive energy projects (such as fossil gas and oil pipelines) and to work with those people to devise permitting regulations that would protect people while avoiding unnecessary delays (such as understaffing of regulatory agencies). However, CCL has few participants from the communities who suffer most from such projects.

Why did CCL change course?

CCL's officer(s) who made that decision can speak for themselves about their reasons. However, I suspect the following factors contributed:

- The 2021-22 session of Congress, Senator Manchin's opposition to anti-fossil-fuel efforts, passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, and the results of the 2022 election may have convinced CCL's officers that CCL could not win CF&D in the near term. I agree CCL could not accomplish more than it did *in the 2021-22 context*. However, in a context with a strong outside game⁶, CCL's inside game⁶ could make CF&D attractive to Congress.
- The same recent history appears to have convinced some of CCL's funders that they no longer need CCL. CCL had overstaffed in recent well-funded years and did not prepare for a funding contraction. Needing to cut staff can panic nonprofit officers and make them susceptible to proposed changes that offer hope of avoiding downsizing. CCL reduced staff a bit in the spring of 2023. Unless CCL's new direction brings serious new funding (which I think unlikely), I expect CCL will still need to reduce staff.

How should we relate to CCL now?

CCL's actions in 2023 and 2024 should show whether it will continue to effectively advocate for CF&D. Those actions may also show what kinds of permitting "reform" CCL will support.

If CCL does not effectively advocate for CF&D, we will reluctantly need to abandon CCL and create a new (possibly democratically guided) organization to win passage of CF&D.

For now, do two things:

- Join and support CCL to continue its previously effective work for CF&D.
- On permitting "reform", watch CCL closely. If CCL becomes harmful on permitting regulations we will need to oppose it on that point.

If necessary, we should find it possible to support one aspect of an organization's work while opposing another.

⁶ See <<https://organizenorthcarolina.org/strategynotes.php#SN208>>.