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U.S. CARBON EMISSIONS DOWN, BUT DECLINE UNLIKELY TO CONTINUE

(*October 2 – Princeton, N.J.*) A Climate Central analysis of the American energy economy shows that the nearly 9 percent reduction in annual carbon emissions in the U.S. from 2005-2011 is unlikely to continue in the years ahead without major departures from the ways energy is currently produced and used.

Annual U.S. fossil fuel CO2 emissions dropped more than 500 million metric tons from 2005 to 2011, or more than half the 17 percent reduction that was targeted for 2020 in the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, also called the Waxman-Markey “cap and trade” bill.

Declines in carbon emissions are the result of a combination of factors including the recession, increased natural gas production and the related decline in coal-fired electricity generation, continuing improvements in efficiencies of energy use, and growth in renewables, particularly wind power.

The recession, however, appears to be the most significant factor in the decline.

“As the economy rebounds, the decline in emissions is likely to be neutralized or overtaken by a growing population and rising incomes that will drive increased energy demand,” said Eric Larson, PhD, author of the study. “All things being equal, more people making more money means more carbon emissions,” Dr. Larson added.

Mandated increases in automobile fuel economy will slow the increase in carbon emissions, but a growing number of drivers, combined with likely expansion in vehicle miles traveled will erase some, if not all, of the carbon gains.

In the face of such growth and the greater than 80 percent reliance of the U.S. on fossil fuels for energy today, the ongoing improvements in energy efficiencies, movement from coal to natural gas, and the gradual expansion of zero-carbon energy alternatives will not provide the level of change in the energy economy needed for carbon emissions to fall by 2050 to a level that most climate scientists believe is needed to avoid severe impacts of climate change.

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