



SAVING ENERGY AND BUYING TIME

Investments in green technologies can give us the breathing room to beat the climate crisis.



AMY DOMINI

THE EARTH'S POPULATION HAS GROWN STAGGERINGLY IN A single lifetime, from less than 3 billion in 1960 to 6.7 billion. And with China and India poised to become consumer societies on an enormous scale, it's natural to assume that demand for energy will grow in lockstep with population. ¶ We tend to think that demand for energy is inelastic—that people will insist on burning a certain amount of fuel to maintain their ways of life. The alternative, as energy executives tried to tell us during

the energy crisis of the 1970s, is to “freeze in the dark.” For those of us who believe reversing global warming is the most urgent challenge of our time, this is a frightening thought.

Yet 30 years ago, it was already obvious that some people manage to live well on a much more modest energy budget than we in the West do. With new technologies, it's possible to trim our energy use even more—and buy some desperately needed time.

Oil executives don't like the idea that we can get along with less of their product. But a recent article in *Financial Week* argues that we can save more energy than we think. After world oil consumption peaked in 1979, the article says, high prices caused demand for oil to drop. The world's oil consumption didn't surpass its 1979 level for a decade, and U.S. oil consumption didn't regain its 1979 level until 18 years later, in 1997.

The same thing may be happening again. The number of vehicle miles driven in the U.S., for example, fell in March of this year

for the first time since 1979. That number continued to drop in April and May.

The difference between 1979 and 2008 is that we have new techniques and technologies to save energy without depriving ourselves of goods, services and hours on the road. As social investors, many of us strive to invest in the companies that are bringing these techniques and technologies to the market.

The spiral-shaped bulbs of compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) have become a symbol of these new approaches. According to the advocacy group Environmental Defense (formerly the Environmental Defense Fund), changing just one 75-watt light bulb to a CFL eliminates about 1,300 pounds of global warming pollution.

Technology for wind power has advanced significantly. Vestas Wind Systems of Denmark, the world's leading supplier of wind power, claims a 28 percent market share with 33,500 wind turbines in place. This year,

the company said it received an order for 232 turbines from a division of the China Guangdong Nuclear Power Group, which has been diversifying away from nuclear power and its radioactive-waste challenges.

Leaders at other companies are finding innovative ways to manufacture products with less energy. The directors of SSAB Swedish Steel, for example, say 60 percent of the steel the company produces comes from recycled scrap metal, which can be smelted in electric arc furnaces or mini-mills that are more energy-efficient than traditional blast furnaces. The company's blast furnaces require coke as fuel, and the company says it uses the gas from coke furnaces as a source of energy for other operations. Other gases generated in steel production are used to make electricity and heat area homes.

The global climate crisis is urgent and enormous. The future itself is at risk. But meeting the challenge isn't impossible. If as consumers and investors and taxpayers we support new energy technologies, we can help give ourselves the breathing room we need to cope with global warming and transition to a more sustainable way of life. It's not too late.

AMY DOMINI is the founder and CEO of Domini Social Investments, and author of several books on ethical investing.