FINALLY, CARBON LIMITS ON POWER PLANTS: OP-ED

I applaud President Barack Obama's recent climate change policy speech. Fundamentally, he's doing what he believes is right. Ethically, he's delivering on a promise he made in 2009 to the United Nations climate conference in Copenhagen: to cut U.S. carbon emissions 17 percent by 2020. Politically, he's invoking executive authority to sidestep Congress because it hasn't done its job.

The linchpin of Obama's initiative is to limit carbon emissions from new and existing power plants, which now account for about 40 percent of the national total, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. To take action, he will authorize the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to require emissions reductions from fossil fuel plants, while being flexible to the needs of individual states.

To make this initiative concrete, here's a case study I stumbled onto a few years ago when researching the immigrant homestead of my wife's family.

North Dakota is the geographic center of the continent. Near the geographic center of that state is a city called Center. During the 2010 census, it had a population of only 571 souls from 169 families. In spite of its trivial size, Center is the county seat of Oliver County. Why? Because it's the only incorporated place. Center has its own center, a small park featuring an abandoned one-room schoolhouse. These facts shout out that Center, though a nice place, is the middle of the middle of nowhere.

Except, that is, for its production of energy from fossil fuel. According to Center's municipal Internet site, five, large coal-fired power plants lie off-center from Center. The Milton R. Young Station is operated by Minnkota Power Cooperative, Inc., which is based out of Grand Forks on the Minnesota state line to the east. Its two units are rated at 705,000 kilowatts. Two units at the Leland Olds Station, rated at 650,000 kilowatts, are owned by Basin Electric Power Cooperative, Bismark, N.D. The Stanton Station is rated at 202,000 kilowatts, and owned and operated by Great River Energy, Elk River, Minn., (near the Twin Cities). These five plants opened in 1966, 1966, 1970, 1975, 1977.

The power plants are there because coal is there in abundance at the surface. It's being mined from what are now called "open air mines," a euphonious euphemism for strip mines. Largest is the Center Mine, owned and operated by a subsidiary of Minnesota Power, based out of Duluth, Minn.

All burn lignite, also called "brown" coal, the lowest grade. Owing to its low carbon density and high moisture content, carbon emissions from lignite are much higher than the "black" coals of bituminous and anthracite. Burning lignite for electricity is just about the worst thing you can do with respect to global carbon emissions. And yet, out there in the middle of the middle of the middle of nowhere, the U.S. is burning enough lignite to produce a whopping 1,557,000 kilowatts of electricity. Out of sight, out of mind.

All five of these plants came on line during the modern environmental movement ignited by Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." Three postdate the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, which enabled formation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency the following year. All five are steaming away because of lax federal policies. Finally, Obama decided he's had enough.

Note also that none of the companies either supplying or burning coal are local. At the state level, the coal is mined and burned in a red state, Republican to its conservative core. Yet much of the electricity it produces is consumed in Minnesota, a progressive blue state, Democratic to its populist core.
Obama's new initiative will take these differences into account. He understands that all politics is local. Congress has been ineffective on climate policy because it's not local enough. Yet the new federal plan will work only if local trade-offs can be implemented.

Bravo to his executive authority. Finally, something will happen to complement the thing I hope won't happen. The Keystone Pipeline for tar sand oil that's almost as bad as lignite.