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To the Editor:

Threats posed by global climate change are likely to rise to very dangerous levels. Climate change discussions should focus on what specific steps we can take to confront those threats.

I focus here on one possible step. I urge that the United States begin raising, by a large margin, the costs of fossil fuels over a period of years. Substantially raising fossil fuel costs should promote two essential types of change: first, dramatically expanding energy conservation efforts by individuals, private entities, and public institutions; and second, encouraging huge innovations in sustainable energy technologies. We will need both.

GlobalPetrolPrices.com has stated the following average gasoline prices for September 16, 2019 (stated in U.S. dollars for a U.S. gallon equivalent): Germany -- $5.80/gallon; United Kingdom -- $6.01; France -- $6.26; Italy -- $6.55; and the United States -- $2.91. The “average gallon price” for those four European countries was approximately $6.15. On that same day the price in Greece was $6.67/gallon.

If we wish to confront climate change threats, Europeans are consuming far too much gasoline, and we Americans are consuming much, much more. Experience in Europe makes clear people will pay a lot for gasoline. Changing human behavior regarding fossil fuel use will necessitate making individuals and institutions pay far more for those fuels than we do now.

Specifically, I recommend the federal government tax gasoline so that its price rises incrementally over the next eight to twelve years from its current level to at least $15.00/gallon (with corresponding tax changes on all other fossil fuels). That figure is more than twice what many millions of Western Europeans have demonstrated is an affordable price for gasoline; achieving it would hopefully help us create a livable future.

We need a **change engine** that substantially reduces fossil fuel use in this country. Dramatically raising current fuel prices can act as that **engine**. Doing so would force us to confront many social, economic, and political issues, and doing so would not by itself “solve” the climate change crisis. However, I see no other step that could alter our individual and collective patterns of fossil fuel consumption reasonably quickly, efficiently, and fairly.

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Note: Richard Booth is an environmental lawyer who teaches in Cornell University’s Department of City and Regional Planning. This letter reflects only his ideas.