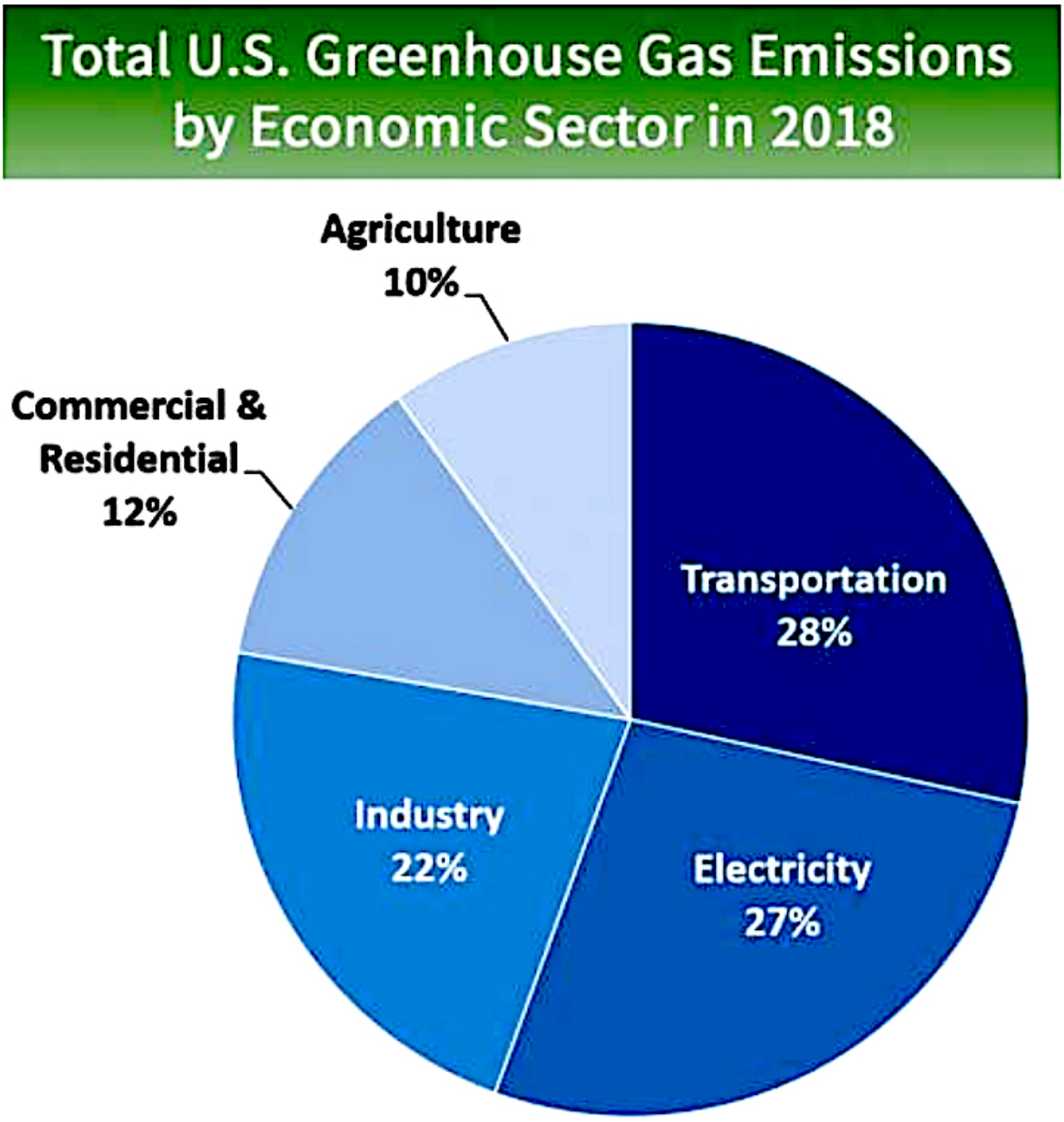


Total Emissions in 2018 = 6,677 Million Metric Tons of CO_2 equivalent. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to independent rounding.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency



by Bill Mitchell

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July 24, 2020
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It turns out that how we get there matters. A lot.

With transportation responsible for 28 percent of the greenhouse gases threatening the planet, the choices we make in this area -- as individuals as well as governments -- have huge consequences.

As lockdowns began stalling transit of all forms back in April, some of the most polluted cities in the world were reporting blue skies unlike any that had been visible for decades.

As more and more regions have been opening up in recent weeks, though, the dirty air has begun settling back in again right along with all that traffic. The Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air created a "COVID-19 Air Pollution Rebound Tracker" to measure what's happening. By early May, the Center found that "health-harming air pollutants" in China had exceeded concentrations in the air for the same period last year.

"The rapid rebound in air pollution and coal consumption levels across China is an early warning of what a smokestack industry-led rebound could look like: highly polluting industries have been faster to recover from the crisis than the rest of the economy," the Center concluded.

If the China example plays out in similar ways around the globe, we'll be right back in the mess we were in before coronavirus.

Arguing that the recovery from the pandemic "cannot be a return to business as usual," the United Nations reported on a recent study examining four "green transport" scenarios in 56 countries in North America, Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Addressing employment issues along with the climate crisis, the report found that millions of new jobs could be created if the countries involved were to come out of the pandemic with a fast and dramatic shift to electric vehicles -- public transit vehicles as well as automobiles.

Looking at the issue from another vantage point, bicycle and pedestrian advocates in a number of cities have been challenging the enormous percentage of precious space that so many locales hand over to cars.

Farhad Manjoo, an opinion columnist for the New York Times, teamed up with the Practice for Architecture and Urbanism to present a visually stunning piece headlined, "I've seen a future without cars, and it's amazing." Among the opening stats: If you added up all the space that Manhattan devotes to cars, you'd have an area nearly four times as large as Central Park -- or nearly 25 percent of all of Manhattan. Manjoo offers a "what if" look at what life might be like if a whole lot of those acres were converted to bike lanes, bigger sidewalks and maybe the occasional bench and potted plant.

Similar discussions -- and experiments -- are happening elsewhere, with some of the shift around the world already underway pre-pandemic.

I live just outside Boston and for the last several years, my wife and I have enjoyed living without a car. It's been pretty easy. We're a two-minute walk to the bus and a six-minute walk to a trolley stop. ZIP cars are parked at the end of our street. Lyft and Uber are never more than a few minutes away.

But we haven't boarded public transportation in more than four months, and ZIP, Lyft and Uber have returned to the location they occupied in our lives not that many

years ago: Nowhere.

At whatever point a vaccine becomes available and we're all once again on the move, we'll be facing some big questions when it comes to getting where we're going. With air pollution leading to an estimated 4 million premature deaths around the world each year, the stakes are high. Some of the questions:

- Will the vaccine be effective enough that we'll again feel safe on public transit?
- Will governments find the political will to invest in a recovery that's green as well as just?
- To what extent will people decide that maybe we don't need to get to as many places as often as we once thought we did?

Here's what's new on EarthBeat this week:

- In a video interview with staff writer Jesse Remedios, environmental health scientist and author Dr. Sylvia Hood Washington explains why her work is rooted in the sanctity of life.
- In a Q&A with Nathanael Johnson of Grist, Mark Lynas spells out the crisis he explores in his new book, "Our Final Warning: Six Degrees of Climate Emergency."
- Staff writer Brian Roewe reports on a $500,000 grant from the U.S. bishops to help put *Laudato Si'* to work by helping low-income people address the impact of climate change.
- Freelance correspondent Sarah Mac Donald interviews Irish theologian Dermot Lane about his government's climate plan -- he likes it but doubts it will happen.
- With a new hydroelectric dam opening in Ethiopia -- the largest on the continent -- Catholic leaders are urging equitable sharing of the Nile, reports Frank Nzwili of Catholic News Service.

Here's some of what's new in other climate news this week:

- Julia Rosen reports in the New York Times about new research suggesting that gas flaring "poses a significant risk to expectant mothers."
- In the latest edition of her HEATED newsletter, Emily Atkin provides a critical assessment of the climate section of the latest draft of the Democratic Party's

2020 platform.

- Brooke Jarvis has an in-depth look at "The Teenagers at the End of the World" in the New York Times Magazine. In case you missed it when we published it last year, here's Brian Roewe's look at a young Catholic climate activist.
- Many environmental organizations have long been lacking in diversity. The Sierra Club spoke out this week against the racist legacy of one of the movement's heros, John Muir. And Energy and Environment News addressed efforts at diversity in the Sunrise Movement.

Upcoming Event:

Franciscan Action Network and Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities will present a webinar at 7 p.m. EDT July 28: Protect our Future: Living out Laudato Si'.

You can add your event -- virtual or otherwise -- here. It's free.

Closing beat:

In one of our first Small Earth Stories last Fall, Daria Mark reported on the efforts of the environmental group Mothers Out Front to reduce pollution in the town of Brookline, Ma. by banning oil and gas installations in new construction and major renovations. The Town Meeting approved the ban by a nearly unanimous vote. But this week the Massachusetts attorney general, Maura Healy, said that even though she supports measures to reduce greenhouse gases she had no choice but to overturn the ban because it conflicts with state law.

Responding to the attorney general's action, Jesse Gray, a Brookline Town Meeting member and co-sponsor of the bylaw told the Boston Globe: “The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is infantilizing Brookline and standing in the way of progress on climate. We call upon the attorney general and upon the state Legislature … to give us the keys to the car that the Commonwealth shows little interest in driving itself.”

We'll keep you posted on what happens. And if you have a story to tell about what *you're* doing to address the climate crisis, please share it with us here.

As always, if you find EarthBeat reporting worthwhile, we urge you to consider supporting NCR with a membership for as little as $5 per month.

Thanks for reading.

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