

Roth: Take a breath, and welcome back

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You may think America is in the middle of a 20-year flashback when Bill Clinton headlines the Democratic Party Convention. But you can literally look around, because of increased visibility, and see other recollections of 1992, namely in air quality and pollution levels.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration reported earlier this year that the United States' total CO2 emissions for the first four months of 2012 fell to 1992 levels. We haven't had air this clean in 20 years. Do you even remember 1992? That's the year saxophonist Clinton was elected president, gas cost \$1.05 a gallon, and Unforgiven, a movie produced and directed by Clint Eastwood, won the Oscar for Best Picture. I guess everything old is new again in this flashback.

As Oklahomans, we are all very conscious of the link between protecting the environment and energy. With that great understanding, we have simultaneously made great strides in energy production and efficiency. Our native roots are linked to "black gold," but we continue to promote and develop clean resources like natural gas and wind, which are our own native commodities. This energy spirit that lives in us continues to push us forward to strive to get better at striking that balance between energy and the environment.

And those advances are why we have cleaner air. Scientists point out that the cause for this dramatic reduction in carbon dioxide is natural gas. More specifically, power plants are burning more natural gas and less coal. Very often we can forget what is actually charging our phones and laptops.

Indeed, there is actually a massive industry of electric generators burning fuels like coal and natural gas that create the voltage you need to keep your refrigerator running at home.

Between the two major fossil fuel options (coal and natural gas), coal has traditionally been the cheapest. But when it burns, it burns dirty. It is arguably so dirty that it has actually been more expensive in terms of health and environmental costs and the harm it causes. It is even so dirty that it releases very harmful emissions that have been linked to cancer and lung disease. Perhaps most relevant, it burns a lot of dirty carbon dioxide.

Because of advances in production and drilling technology, many of which have been pioneered right here in Oklahoma, America has gained access to an abundant, rich supply of natural gas. This great supply has created record-low natural gas prices, even cheaper than coal. As a result, more and more electric generators and big utilities are switching their fuel sources from coal to natural gas. By entering into a series of long-term fuel supply contracts, these electric generators are able to lock in this new normal low gas price. The benefits are the reversal of decades of worsening air pollution and a chance to breathe like it's 1992 again.

Check out the numbers from 2011 to 2012 alone. Sulfur dioxide was reduced by 31 percent because natural gas, when it burns, does so with virtually no sulfur dioxide. Nitrous dioxide? Reduced by 22 percent. And, the whole point of all of this? Carbon dioxide caused by coal was reduced by 19 percent. I don't know where you were in 1992, but I'm glad to be back at least for the purposes of better air quality.

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