There are a lot of complaints about the very real flaws in the Inflation Reduction Act, tied with arguments that we should wait until we can do something better. In climate policy, however, waiting is dangerous.  We’ve already delayed far too long. Further delay means having to cut emission much more rapidly to make up for lost time. That could turn the goal of getting to net zero emissions by 2050 from merely very difficult to virtually impossible.

Because cutting carbon emissions also reduces emissions of deadly particulates, delay could also cost thousands of lives.

Basically, if you think climate change is emergency, it doesn’t make sense to reject a current, flawed remedy in the hope of getting something better somewhere down the road.

I’ll begin with some numbers to show how this might all work and then add some additional reasons why delay would be very costly.

**Crunching a few numbers.**

To be concrete, consider this hypothetical scenario: Suppose that we hold out for a better policy, which prevents new legislation until the end of this decade — but at that point, we get to pass a flawless law. How much faster do we need to cut emissions after 2030 to make up for the delay?

I hope that doesn’t seem too much like one of those “*One train is going 58 mph . . .*” problems we can all remember from school. It’s actually much simpler – just a matter of looking up some numbers and doing some arithmetic.

According to one estimate, the IRA will cut emissions by a billion tons  annually by 2030. Instead of emitting about five billion tons in 2030, we’d emit only four billion tons.  We’ll then have twenty years to get from four billion tons a year to zero (or nearly zero, with some offsets). Without the IRA, we’ll have to cut five billion tons in the same amount of time. That works out to 200 million tons per year with the IRA versus 250 million without it. Basically, we’re going to have to play catch-up in a situation that would have been difficult anyway, like standing around on the starting line for a few minutes before trying to win a race.

But it’s actually worse than that. Without the IRA, we’d emit about another 2.5 billion tons of carbon, which will all stay in the atmosphere. To make up for the

excess, we have to cut emissions even more rapidly to keep total post-2030 emissions lower.

**The gamble.**

The hypo takes a lot of uncertainties and turns them into a simple story: We either get the IRA or we wait eight years and get perfect legislation. This isn’t realistic, but making it more realistic adds a risk element along with delay.

On the one hand, it assumes no new legislation until 2030. If the House flips in November as expected, that means no new federal legislation until 2025, but there’s obviously a chance that at some point between 2025 and 2030, the Democrats might regain control and pass something.

On the other hand, whatever legislation we did get between 2024 and 2030 is unlikely to be flawless. Rather, this hypothetical future legislation might be weaker than the IRA or could have greater flaws in areas like environmental justice. And maybe the stars won’t actually come in alignment again for major legislation in the next eight years — after all, we’ve gone thirteen years since the last time we got close to passing anything, in 2009. It’s a big gamble with a very high price in terms of delay even if we win the bet.

**Factors increasing the cost of delay.**

My number-crunching example leaves out two factors that make delay even more costly. The first is the effect of continued inaction by the federal government on international negotiations. The U.S. is still the second largest emitter in the world. If we refuse to cut our own emissions, we can’t expect to have much credibility in those negotiations. Our failure to cut emissions could also give other countries an excuse for inaction — really the reverse of the old argument, “Why should America cut emissions if China isn’t?”

The second factor increasing the cost of delay involves the side benefits of cutting emissions. The IRA is expected to cut 3,000 to 4,000 deaths per year, many of them in disadvantaged communities with high exposure to air pollution. Even a three-year delay would mean about 10,000 additional deaths.

**The moral of the story.**

If your house is on fire, you should start putting it out with whatever if you’ve got at

hand, rather than waiting in the hope of finding something better. Ditto if it’s your planet rather than your house that’s starting to burn.  The IRA is flawed, but we can’t afford to wait a few years and hope for a better result then.