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Climate Change Op-Ed

Release: April 30, 2006

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Global warming talk at fever pitch

Published in the Midland Daily News

04/30/2006

With Earth Day just past, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the health of our planet. The news media has certainly taken this opportunity – discussion of global warming (a.k.a. climate change) has reached a fever pitch. Time, Vanity Fair, and US News and World Report have all recently run lengthy special reports on global warming, and editorials abound in the major newspapers.

What's happening here? Is this just press sensationalism?

Well, no; not if you look to the scientific community, the business world, and recent polling on what the American public thinks on the issue of global warming. In all cases, there has been marked shift: we all agree that global warming is a real threat that must be addressed immediately.

In the scientific community, there is no longer any real debate about whether global warming is real and is happening. Every week brings new scientific evidence that the impacts of global climate change are appearing sooner than anticipated by scientists. Ice sheets melt, polar sea ice becomes sparser and sparser, permafrost thaws, record high global average temperatures are seen year after year, high ocean surface temperatures and more carbon dioxide (CO₂) dissolving into the ocean from the atmosphere cause massive coral reef die-offs

Of course climate science is extremely complex, and there continue to be many surprises and new discoveries. But one has to look back several decades to find any significant science-based dissent to the idea that greenhouse gases emitted by human activity, especially CO₂ emitted from the burning of fossil fuels, are causing the Earth's surface to warm. Now, discussion among scientists centers on the range of possible futures. How much will temperatures rise? How high will global sea levels rise? What new weather patterns will emerge? Will parts of the world see more rainstorms while other areas see drought? These are important questions, but with regard to the central question of whether or not humans are inducing climate change, the science is settled. We are doing a very big experiment with the only planet we've got.

Because of the clear danger of this big experiment, scientists, who usually refrain from drawing any conclusions other than those directly arising from their research, are becoming nervous about their findings. Many are venturing out of the laboratory to call for action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. NASA scientist and Director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) Dr. James Hansen has seen the media spotlight as one of the more outspoken scientists. He warns that continuing to emit greenhouse gases will result in an additional 4°C increase in average temperatures over the next century, saying "[that's] not something we can adapt to. We can't let it go on another 10 years like this." Dr. Tim Barnett, senior oceanographer at the Scripps Institution, says "the big payoff is going to be for our children. Together, if we take a concentrated action as a people, we might be able to slow it down enough to avoid these surprises." Dr. Michael Oppenheimer, professor of geosciences and international affairs at Princeton University, says "all our lives will be affected and most of those effects will be very unpleasant." Scientists want to help the public understand climate change!

A shift is apparent in the business world as well. A growing number of corporations are lobbying for mandatory curbs on CO2 emissions, because they believe the global warming problem is real and regulation at some future date is inevitable. Those companies would rather have regulation sooner than later, because the uncertainty of when regulation will begin and at what level makes business planning challenging. For example, Cinergy, a coal-fired utility company based in Ohio, points out that their company is on the cusp of a massive new infrastructure investment cycle, and planners would welcome certainty in the future price of carbon emissions. As such, Cinergy supports mandatory carbon "cap-and-trade" legislation, which would regulate the maximum total emissions but allow companies to trade emissions credits, so that the market minimizes the overall cost. Kevin Leahy of Cinergy said, "We feel [carbon emissions] will be regulated at some point. We want to be involved in crafting a policy that is workable." Several other utilities stepped forward at the April 4 Senate Climate Conference to voice similar support for mandatory regulation. Coal and oil companies want regulation!

Lastly, in public opinion, a shift is apparent as well. A recent Gallup poll (March 2006) shows that 58% of Americans believe that the effects of global warming have already begun, and a further 15% believe they will begin within their lifetime. And the trend is increasing. According to a February 2006 Opinion Research Corporation poll, 34% are "much more concerned" about global warming now than two years ago. Global warming is the one environmental issue that has gained support in recent years.

The public is convinced that the climate crisis is real, and they would like to see political action. Sixty-eight percent of Americans polled in March 2006 by Time/ABC/Stanford said the federal government should do "much more" or "somewhat more" about climate change. And this applied even when respondents were asked to consider the cost they will bear: asked by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in 2005 if they favor requiring large firms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, 83% said yes. When given a hypothetical trickled-down monthly cost of \$15 for an average household, 68% still favored the regulation. The public wants to pay to fix our climate!

To borrow a phrase being bantered around the scientific community to describe the point of no return where some degree of climate change is locked in, we have reached a "tipping point" in public opinion. It is no longer fair to say that it would be "political suicide" to take actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that would cost the American public money – 59% of Americans would favor a gas tax increase if it resulted in less gasoline consumption and less global warming, according to a February 2006 New York Times/CBS poll.

Scientists, business leaders, and the American public believe that it is time for urgent action to reduce the negative impacts of climate change. Will our leadership in Washington step up to the challenge and opportunity of shifting our country's energy usage away from carbon-intense fossil fuels, and towards a sustainable future for our planet? Will we start soon enough?

In the meantime, there is much we can do. We can all help by conserving energy (lower energy bills AND less CO2 pumped into the atmosphere!), encouraging our elected officials to take this issue seriously, and investing wherever possible in renewable, non-carbon energy sources like solar panels, solar hot water heating, biofuels, geothermal energy, and wind energy. As Al Gore says in his May Vanity Fair essay, "this climate crisis is, indeed, extremely dangerous, but it also presents unprecedented opportunities."

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