

William F. Felice

Congress should stop ignoring our climate crisis (again) | Column

The status quo cannot be allowed to prevail. We do not have the luxury of disparaging inaction.



A flare burns natural gas at an oil well Aug. 26, 2021, in Watford City, N.D. [MATTHEW BROWN | AP]

In 1988, NASA scientist James Hansen testified to Congress that the era of global warming leading to climate change had arrived and would become the defining ecological issue of our time. Hansen presented evidence from NASA indicating how the greenhouse gases emitted in modern societies — notably carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels — trap heat from the Earth’s surface that would normally be radiated out to space, just as the glass over a greenhouse traps the sun’s heat. The so-called greenhouse effect leads directly to global warming, an increase in global average temperatures in the Earth’s climate patterns.

Politicians initially responded vigorously to Hansen’s testimony. In the midst of his presidential campaign, George H.W. Bush stated: “Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the greenhouse effect forget about the ‘White House effect’; as president, I intend to do something about it. ... We will talk about global warming and we will act.”



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[UNKNOWN | Photo: Courtesy]

Yet, neither Bush nor subsequent presidents acted effectively to prevent our climate crisis. When Hansen delivered his speech in 1988, fossil fuels provided around 79 percent of the world’s energy needs. Thirty years later, in 2018, it was actually worse — 81 percent. In fact, from 1988 to 2018, global carbon dioxide emissions rose by 68 percent.

President Joe Biden has put forward aggressive plans to fight what he calls the “existential threat” of climate change. Unfortunately, his proposal to spend around \$550 billion on climate and clean-energy measures remains stalled in Congress. As is well known, West Virginia’s Sen. Joe Manchin, with a personal fortune tied to fossil fuels, has consistently blocked this component of Biden’s Build Back Better program. And, more significantly, Republican members of Congress refuse to display any political courage to buck extremists in their ranks and join the fight to protect our environment.

This inaction has extended devastating consequences. The U.N. World Meteorological Organization recently published its “State of the Global Climate in 2021” report. According to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the report presents “a dismal litany of humanity’s failure to tackle climate disruption.” The World Meteorological Organization reports that four key climate indicators broke worldwide records in 2021:

- * Greenhouse gas concentrations rose to a global high of 149% of pre-industrial levels and continues to climb in early 2022.
- * Ocean heat levels reached record highs, a shift that the U.N. said “could not be reversed within 1,000 years.”
- * Ocean acidification also broke records threatening marine organisms and ecosystem services. “Surface pH in the open ocean dropped to the lowest it has been for at least 26,000 years.”
- * Global mean sea level also climbed to new highs. The mean sea level in 2013-2021 rose at double the rate than that of the 1993-2002 period.

It’s hard for me to write this column. Everyone I know is tired of talking about climate change and global warming. Decades of inaction have taken a toll on our psychic ability to believe that we can really address these environmental issues. Those of us who raise these issues are constantly criticized for “alarmism” or “bad strategy” for presenting facts. I expect to again be criticized for presenting a too dark, dismal picture of the future.

Yet, the status quo cannot be allowed to prevail. We do not have the luxury of disparaging inaction. Hundreds of thousands of people in the U.S. and on every continent are today working for environmental preservation and the provision and protection of basic human needs. History teaches us that profound change can happen quite quickly and often when least expected. Our pressure on Congress to act to limit greenhouse gas emissions must be unrelenting. Eventually we will succeed.

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