

Understanding our Changing Climate – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Recently, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released their latest assessment regarding the increasing risks of climate change. The IPCC report was developed by 234 climate scientists from 66 countries. The report says that the connection between human emissions of greenhouse gases and global warming is “unequivocal.” The report goes on to state “Atmospheric CO₂ concentrations were higher in 2019 than at any time in at least 2 million years, and the past 50 years saw the fastest temperature increases in at least 2,000 years.” So, what does this mean for us locally, and what can we do?

Climate scientists tell us that climate change will present itself to us primarily through weather extremes. It may seem unfortunate or unfair, but climate trends and future projections show that dry areas are getting drier, and wet areas are getting wetter. We are seeing this pattern play out here in the United States. The western half of the country is becoming progressively drier, and the eastern half of the country is becoming wetter and more prone to flooding.

Locally, we are now starting to see weather extremes here, with recent flooding along McKay Creek and the Umatilla River, and with a severe drought and heatwave this summer. Last fall’s devastating wildfires are also still on our minds, coupled with large wildfires this past summer.

Whatever our political, economic, or cultural beliefs may be, our changing climate will affect us all. Since humans and the burning of fossil fuels, among other things, are widely known to be causing these climatic changes, it is up to us to deal with our actions. Recent global polls have revealed that climate change is of high concern for our younger generations. A large part of that concern is distress with the lack of action by governments. What we leave for them, and what we do or not do will be our legacy.

It will take action from locally to internationally to slow the advance of these adverse effects of a warming planet. If we believe there is not much we can do, nothing will change other than continued warming and the resulting consequences for us all. If we believe we cannot or do not have the will to modify our behaviors, again, nothing will change these warming trends.

We can do better, though. Although our economy is based on consumption, we can reduce what we buy, what we throw away, and support industries and businesses committed to sustainable growth and production. We can recycle more. We can travel less in our vehicles and by airplanes. If space allows, we can grow more of our own food and increase plant-based diets. We can take advantage of the incentives for home and business solar power and electric vehicles. And we can vote. We can vote at all political levels for those with vision and commitment to take positive action to reduce the adverse effects of climate change.

As weather extremes continue to affect us, we must find our political and personal will to act. Americans represent 5% of the world population, yet we consume 30% of world resources. We have the luxury of being able to buy, to travel, and to behave as we please. Let us use this enormous privilege to do something positive and aggressive both personally and politically to

combat the sources and adverse effects of a changing climate before our options dwindle. We all have responsibilities for these climate trends, and we can all play a part in what we leave to our children and future generations.

Jeff Blackwood retired from a career with the U.S. Forest Service, and is a member of the Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition.