

CLIMATE CHANGED

Making climate change understandable, approachable

The brutal coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that we live in an interconnected world. When things go haywire in some small place, its repercussions can soon be felt on the other side of the globe.

So it is with our climate.

The dryland wheat fields of Umatilla County connect to the roiling sea at the Columbia Bar, Mt. Bachelor's snowy slopes connect to the Painted Hills, the alpine meadows of the Wallawas connect to the Amazon rainforest and the Australian outback.

Climate is a worldwide phenomenon — too large to easily comprehend. Yet, it is as local as your backyard garden, as intimate as the air you breathe.

For decades, it has been difficult for media organizations to connect global climate implications to local lives. We're just not designed for it.

For plenty of good reasons, newspapers focus on what occurred today and what you need to know to get through tomorrow: how the Senate voted, how the judge ruled, who won the big game. The daily temperature increasing steadily, but at a relatively unnoticeable amount from day-to-day, rarely met the newsworthiness requirements to make the front page.

That means we've been ill-equipped to cover perhaps the biggest story currently pulsing through our planet: the consistent creep of a changing climate.

That change has massive implications for our daily lives. The world around us is increasingly hostile to human life — a petri dish capable of moving a deadly virus across the world in a few months, with unnatural forests sitting a lightning strike away from inferno, levees straining against 100-year floods each spring, air so foul it is taking years off our lives.

The systems of agriculture, infrastructure and technology that undergird civilization are at risk. And that's front page news.

Yet, this change has manifested in dribs and drabs. For most people, it won't be noticeable — it won't be real — until they see it in their garden or feel it in their lungs.

EO Media Group, imperfect though it may be, is well organized to attempt to stitch the local impacts to you and your community into a wider story of the region and the world.

We have done it before, to acclaim. In 2007, our organization won the prestigious Grantham Prize for excellence in reporting on the environment. That project included traditional, local reporting on climate change by our newsrooms — from the sandy spit of Long Beach, Washington, to the dry pine forests of John Day, Oregon. It offered views on

the issue from diverse people in diverse locations. We shared the diverse demands those people made on their water, soil and air.

Placing disparate stories alongside one other in 2007 helped readers get a sense of climate change in a new way. By watching people deal with different issues in different communities, readers were able to see the larger context of climate at play.

This year we're embarking on a similar project. Climate issues have changed dramatically in the intervening 13 years, so we're looking back on what has changed, we're looking at the facts on the ground now, and we're looking ahead to what is still to come.

It's not the most opportune time. COVID-19 has devastated the world economy and the local news ecosystem has been no exception. Many people are out of work, out of the office, out of daily routine.

But for a project like this, our current moment has its benefits. We can now clearly see the invisible threads that connect the world. If airplane traffic can clearly help spread a virus, we now understand

that it can also spread pollution that affects Northwest communities — even if the flight was between Dubai and Tokyo. We now see clearly that it costs lives to ignore, downplay and be ill-prepared for a disaster that science tells us is approaching.

Despite the constraints in our world and in our newsrooms, we're moving forward with this important work. In this paper — and *EO Media Group* papers like it — you'll see stories written by your local reporters about climate issues in your community. And you'll see reporting from other locations — places you've visited, places where you have family, places you haven't heard of.

We have no desire to make this political. And, while our reporting will be backed by science, we're not going to inundate you with data.

We will cover climate change like we would cover every other local issue: We'll talk to your neighbors and representatives about what they are doing about it, we'll get advice from local experts, and we'll tease out the impacts on local industry and community life.

Our goal is to make climate change understandable and approachable. We want it to be an issue that you can get your head around and do something about.

Tim Trainor is the former news editor of the East Oregonian. He is overseeing the EO Media Group's "Climate Changed" series.



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