
Guest Editorial: Climate Change

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As we deal with the disruption of our lives by the COVID-19 pandemic, we're also now watching so much of Oregon, Washington, and California burn on an unprecedented scale. Records keep being broken across the west (130° Death Valley, 121° Los Angeles) as well as dramatic temperature swings with half a foot of snow a day after 100° temperatures near Denver. Tropical storms become category 4 hurricanes in a day, while dry lightning storms ignite hundreds of wildfires in one calamitous evening.

Increases in extreme weather events was a key projection of human-induced climate change by Exxon's scientists in their 1977 analysis of the effects of increasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Since the late 1800s, we've known the physics behind global warming — increases in greenhouse gases (GHGs) such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide capture heat to produce a warm planet. There is nothing new about the causes of the strange weather events we're seeing. It's just that we are now seeing those events happening at a scale we can no longer ignore. In fact, the changes are happening more quickly than projected and they will continue to worsen until we do something.

We're now faced with three options: 1) ignore the science and evidence and keep doing what we've always done, 2) take immediate actions to eliminate the cause of the problems, 3) mitigate the effects of the changing climate. Loss of life, health, property, and our current way of life are too dear to accept the first option. Eliminating the cause (2) is critical to avoid the worst effects of climate change. However, we also must mitigate the new conditions (3).

Rather than debating about the causes of the new climatic conditions, we need to decide how to deal with these new conditions, both in the short term and long term. That effort will require everyone who could be affected by these extreme weather events, both young and old, to join in the discussions. Can the free market make the necessary changes quickly enough or must they be mandated by government? How can the energy companies (oil, gas, coal) help make the change or is there no place for them? How do we equitably manage the costs (direct and indirect) without yet again putting the burden on those least able to afford them.

However, even in this crisis, there are huge opportunities. There are new jobs in renewable energy production, storage, and distribution; sustainable food production; energy efficiency; advanced infrastructure and more. There will be many opportunities for new businesses, and training for these 21st century jobs will be critical. However, this bright future demands a cooperative, collective effort by everyone interested in shaping and enjoying that new future. If you're interested in being part of this future, please drop me a note at bill@socan.eco.

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