

Climate Change — The Time to Act Is Now

by Erin Noble

The problem

Heat-trapping gases such as carbon dioxide occur naturally in our atmosphere and are essential to a habitable Earth. Human activity including the burning of fossil fuels has caused a rapid increase in the levels of carbon dioxide never before seen. If continued unabated, the increase of global warming gases will lead to a plethora of environmental catastrophes that will have a tremendous impact on life on Earth.

Cycles of global warming do occur naturally on Earth. For instance, the last ice age came to an end as global temperatures increased by a mere three degrees, a process that took over 5,000 years to occur. In comparison, the Earth's temperature rose a full degree in the 20th century alone, and is projected to rise an additional four degrees in the next one hundred years.

The projected impacts of global warming are petrifying. The melting of the polar ice caps will lead to increased sea levels and widespread coastal flooding. Higher atmospheric temperatures will cause more extreme weather patterns including longer droughts, more frequent wildfires, and more intense heat waves. Hurricanes are expected to increase in number and severity.

Changing climates put plant and animal biodiversity at risk as invasive species move into and dominate local, native species. Animals like polar bears will be increasingly threatened because of the melting of the polar ice cap and accompanying loss of habitat. Even the most conservative projections of the economic impacts of global warming suggest losses totaling \$500 billion from crop failure, flooding, and contaminated drinking water alone.

What Can You Do?

Policy and behavioral changes must occur now in order to combat global warming. The positive side to this pressing issue is that in many cases technology and resources are already available to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. However, we cannot stand idly by waiting for others to implement changes, but must take action in two ways:

1. Promote political change.

Support politicians who advocate strong policy initiatives to curb greenhouse gas emission like increases in vehicle fuel efficiency standards and tax credits for hybrid vehicles and green building.

Encourage your leaders to implement sound policy. One way to do so is to join the Missouri Coalition for the Environment and the Ozark Chapter of the Sierra Club in their efforts to convince mayors in Missouri to sign the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement.

The US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement was launched by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and is a pledge by cities to reduce fossil fuel emissions to 7% below 1990 levels by 2012. Since Mayor Nickels signed the Agreement in 2005, more than 240 mayors across the country have joined him. The efforts of the Coalition and the Sierra Club in Missouri are paying off: Kansas City Mayor Barnes, University City Mayor Adams, Maplewood Mayor Langston, St. Louis Mayor Slay, Florissant Mayor Lowery, Sr., Clayton Mayor Uchitelle, Kirkwood Mayor Swoboda, and Sunset Hills Mayor Hunzeker have signed the Agreement.

Do your own part at the local level by calling your mayor and asking him or her to sign the Agreement. Tell your mayor, aldermen, and city council members that they can fulfill the pledge by implementing the following actions:

- Use compact fluorescent light-bulbs and EnergyStar appliances in public buildings to lower electric bills.
- Adopt the US Green Building Council's LEED standards for all public buildings, both new and existing.
- Replace the city fleet vehicles with hybrids, which use a frac-

tion of the gasoline of regular cars. More models are available today than ever before.

- Support "Idle-Free Schools" to prevent fuel waste and reduce toxic air pollution from idling school buses and cars.
- Improve and expand the city's recycling program. The use of recycled materials requires far less energy than raw natural resources.
- Plant more trees throughout the city to absorb carbon dioxide.

2. Make Personal Lifestyle Changes.

We can make better choices that can drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

- Reduce your impact by driving less. Consider purchasing a more fuel-efficient vehicle.
- Try to ride a bicycle and use public transportation as frequently as you can.
- Recycle.
- Use compact fluorescent light-bulbs and EnergyStar appliances.
- Ensure your tires are properly inflated to maximize gas mileage and efficiency.
- Avoid purchasing products with a lot of packaging and plastic, an oil by-product.

Erin Noble is Outreach and Development Coordinator for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment. She will speak at the July 5, 2006 "Instead of Oil" forum.