

The Register-Guard

<http://www.registerguard.com/>

BOB DOPPELT: Heed Sandy, and stop ignoring climate change

BY BOB DOPPELT

For The Register-Guard

Published: Today

It is truly ironic that Hurricane Sandy hammered the Northeast just days before a presidential election notable for its deafening silence on climate disruption. We now have experienced the tragic loss of life, damage to property and infrastructure, and enormous costs of human-caused climate disruption.

The storm and its aftermath offer three very important lessons.

First, time's up. Climate disruption is no longer a future concern. It's happening right now, is extremely dangerous to humans and the Earth's ecological systems, and left unchecked will get significantly worse.

The hurricane, which reportedly caused \$30 billion to \$50 billion in damage, followed the summer's unprecedented heat waves, wildfires and droughts, which caused billions more in economic harm.

These costs were incurred with a global average temperature increase of only about 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels. It is almost certain that temperatures will rise by an additional 1.8 degrees, and maybe much more. Many climate scientists believe an increase of somewhere around 3.6 degrees is likely to trigger uncontrollable climate disruption.

A new report from the London-based firm PricewaterhouseCoopers found that the world economy must cut carbon intensity by 5.1 percent every year until 2050 to prevent runaway climate disruption. It found that not once since 1950 has the world achieved that rate of decarbonization. We now must achieve that rate every year for 39 consecutive years.

The report concluded that to achieve that target and avoid catastrophic climate change, a radical economic transformation is required. That leads to the second lesson from Hurricane Sandy. The fundamental cause of climate disruption is the way our economy functions.

The single most dominant feature of our economy is its dependence on continual consumption-driven growth. The need to expand Gross Domestic Product constantly is taken as a given by most economists, business leaders and politicians. This is because when growth stops, businesses cut back, which causes unemployment, and can trigger a vicious cycle leading to recession. More people, and more consumption per person, are seen as ways to ensure that firms always have customers for their goods.

In our current economic model, more consumption requires greater use of energy and throughput of materials. When our consumption-dependent system emerged in the 1950s, few people thought this was problematic. Natural resources were plentiful, and environmental problems were mostly localized.

As Hurricane Sandy tragically demonstrates, those conditions have long since passed. Today, the greenhouse gases and damage to forests and other ecological systems that naturally sequester carbon generated by the economy's massive throughput of energy and materials has destabilized our planet's climate.

So, we are in a pickle. We need to grow the economy to get people back to work. However, given our current economic model, increased growth will add to the conditions that produce more frequent and intense extreme weather events, sea level rise, ocean acidification and other troubles that will produce the economic hardships that our consumption-dependent system seeks to prevent.

Just as our current economic system resulted from explicit decisions made in the late 1940s and '50s, the solution to today's dilemma is to decide to rapidly decouple economic activity from environmental impacts. We need big fundamental changes in the goals and structure of our economy.

This leads to the third lesson from Hurricane Sandy. We must quickly get our priorities straight. President Obama must decide to tell the American public the truth about our predicament. He must then call business, civic and government officials from all political persuasions to Washington for an emergency summit to formulate solutions.

Those solutions must include all possible actions to rapidly increase energy and material efficiency and conservation by 30 percent to 40 percent.

They must include subsidizing or in other ways rapidly scaling-up renewable energy, expanding public transportation and aggressively pursuing other similar strategies.

We must halt activities that damage the environment such as clear cutting forests, even if they generate revenue for local counties or build the university a new golf course. And, we must enact a tax on carbon and many other policies to support those goals.

In short, Hurricane Sandy has shown us that to prevent catastrophic climate disruption we need a mass mobilization similar to what occurred in World War II, this time focused on restructuring our economy to protect the planet and ourselves.

Bob Doppelt is executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, which is affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Communities at Willamette University, where he is a senior fellow.

Copyright © 2012 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA