

BOB DOPPELT

Gore's back with even more inconvenience

BY BOB DOPPELT

For The Register-Guard

JULY 27, 2017

Al Gore knows his stuff. Last month I attended a three-day meeting on climate change with the former vice president and his Climate Reality Project. His detailed knowledge about the causes, effects and solutions to human-induced climate disruption, and his ability to communicate it in simple terms, were remarkable.

The first day centered on Gore's presentation of an updated version of "An Inconvenient Truth," the slideshow that helped him win the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. He started by describing how burning coal, oil, and natural gas — as well as other human activities — are releasing heat-trapping greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere at an unprecedented rate. As more heat is trapped, the Earth's climate system becomes more disrupted, leading to numerous effects on ecosystems and society.

This is not theory. Scientists have known about the greenhouse effect since the late 1800s.

He then brought some of us to tears with disheartening pictures of damaged homes, neighborhoods, infrastructure, crops and forests caused by record rain and windstorms, heat waves, floods, droughts, wildfires, a rising sea level and other disasters occurring worldwide.

Gore then localized the information by describing how average annual temperatures in the Seattle-Tacoma area have risen by almost 2 degrees since 1950. By 2050, the average annual temperature in the Pacific Northwest may be 5.8 degrees hotter than today.

After making a powerful case for urgent action, the former presidential candidate shifted to solutions. This section was much better than the version I saw years ago that gave the impression of merely asking people to change their light bulbs.

In many locations, he said, clean renewable energy is quickly approaching, or has already reached, “grid parity” — renewables now cost less than, or the same as, other sources of energy. When grid parity is reached, demand for renewables accelerates and interest in hydrocarbons shrinks. “We can win this,” Gore declared, if we keep pushing hard to expand renewables.

I kept waiting for Gore to describe how to counter the fossil fuel industry campaign to mobilize utilities to oppose state and local financial incentives that promote renewables, but he never did. Nevertheless, his optimism was contagious.

Numerous presentations followed. One discussed how to prevent the Trump administration from gutting federal environmental policies. Some general principles were offered, but the underlying issue of how to thwart the seizure of the federal government by Wall Street and corporate billionaires and right-wing extremists that are driving the process was not addressed.

One session that stood out was a panel involving Dr. Amy Snover from the University of Washington Climate Impacts Group, and other climate scientists. They acknowledged that no matter how fast we cut emissions, temperatures will rise by 2.7 Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels, possibly within just a decade or so, and likely higher afterwards. Due to lag times in the climate system, they emphasized that big emission cuts are urgently needed now to bring temperatures back down to manageable levels again later this century.

I appreciated their straight talk. But no one discussed how to prepare for the impacts that will occur between now and the time in the future when temperatures might be reduced to safe levels again.

Another excellent panel focused on the effects of climate change on public health. Dr. Howard Fromkin from the UW School of Public Health described the illnesses and diseases associated with rising temperatures — including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems.

This was helpful, but he did not mention that mental health problems can easily turn into psychosocial maladies such as family abuse, aggression and violence that threaten everyone's safety, health and well-being.

Dr. Kristie Albi from the UW Department of Global Health came to Fromkin's rescue by saying, "People are already dying from climate change. The health of many people has been affected. And many more will get ill or die due to climate change."

Albi then added, "The health profession is stuck in the old 'medical model of health' that focuses on assessing and treating symptoms rather than emphasizing prevention. ... If we moved beyond this and create a strong prevention system, we could prevent many problems."

This was one of the most important messages I heard during the entire meeting. Tackling climate change is not about deprivation. If we ramp up and connect efforts to prevent psychosocial, physical health and ecological problems, life can improve for everyone on many fronts. This message should be repeated far and wide.

Despite the overlooked issues, Gore's meeting was heartening. "An Inconvenient Truth Sequel: Truth to Power" will be released on Friday. I encourage everyone to see it. You are likely to be as invigorated as I was.

Bob Doppelt, executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change and issues related to sustainability.