

# The Register-Guard

## Opinion

# Doppelt: Legislators Must Face Climate Crisis

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**By Bob Doppelt**

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It seems like lifetimes ago that I was deeply involved in the legislative process. But I recently engaged again on two climate bills before the Oregon Legislature and was disheartened to see so much intentional lack of understanding among some legislators and their staff.

A number of officials, for example, told me that carbon dioxide is not a problem because even breathing creates it. This is unrelated to the climate crisis.

A natural carbon cycle has existed on earth for millions of years. Animals, plants, and humans emit CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere through respiration, while plants absorb it through photosynthesis and the oceans and other water bodies also capture and recirculate it. The climate crisis came about because humans have added massive amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> above and beyond the natural carbon cycle by burning fossil fuels.

Another misperception I've heard is that no more extreme weather events exist today than in previous times. This confuses climate, which describes long-term systemic conditions, with weather, which is a short-term event that is shaped by the larger climate system.

Carbon dioxide, methane, and other atmospheric gasses trap heat. Ice core samples show that before the industrial revolution began in the mid-1700s the amount of atmospheric greenhouse gasses averaged 280 parts per million. This level captured just enough heat to allow civilization to develop.

Today, it is almost 410 parts per million, an amount not seen in millions of years, and we keep adding 2 ppm annually. Average global temperatures have

consequently risen by 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial times. This has disrupted the earth's climate system, which in turn is producing well-documented, more frequent and extreme weather patterns.

These and other fictions I've heard could quickly be dispelled with a little fact checking. But they persist because legislators refuse to separate facts from beliefs due to what I call climate dissociation. This process is used to cope with situations that threaten to shatter people's deeply-held views of the world or themselves by ignoring or denying the events or in other ways disconnecting from reality.

Many Republicans I've spoken with — and also some Democrats — seem fearful that acknowledging the climate crisis will shatter long-held beliefs about the righteousness of certain economic practices, the role of government, religious principles, or other tenets. To cope, they deny it is happening, adopt erroneous notions of cause and effect, or believe people working to address the crisis have clandestine agendas.

Dissociation can be a helpful short-term psychological defense mechanism if it gives people time to come to grips with distressing events. When it is ongoing, as it clearly is among some legislators, it becomes harmful because people ignore flashing red lights and fail to make life-saving corrections.

Scientists recently said temperatures in the Arctic are now certain to rise by at least 5.4 degrees. This underscores the urgency of addressing the climate crisis. Legislators who continue to sing La-La-La-La with fingers in their ears must quickly learn how to overcome dissociation and deal with that reality. Society's future depends on it.

*Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for the Register Guard on climate change-related issues.*