

BOB DOPPELT: Climate change: No excuse for inaction An international panel makes dire predictions about our fragile planet

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“High carbon growth kills itself.” Those were the words of Sir Nicholas Stern, former chief economist with the World Bank, at the International Scientific Congress on Climate Change that I attended recently in Copenhagen. Stern’s pithy comment summarized the findings of the more than 2,500 scientists from 80 countries that participated in the event.

The congress was held to provide world leaders attending the United Nations’ Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen this December with the most up-to-date scientific information. COP 15, as the upcoming U.N. meeting is called, is intended to hammer out a new international agreement to reduce climate-damaging carbon emissions. The existing international agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, has failed to slash emissions. A new accord is urgently needed to set the world on a safe path.

The six key messages government officials will receive from the scientific congress are at once unnerving and optimistic.

The first relates to observed climate trends. The congress concluded that the most damaging scenarios of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are being realized. Although Stern and a few other luminaries said that if society acts quickly, temperature increases could be held to 3.6 degrees by the end of the century, no scientist I spoke with at the congress shared that confidence. In fact, many said that temperatures might rise by 6 degrees to 9 degrees.

As the Earth warms, droughts, floods, heat waves and other extreme weather events will become more frequent. In addition, scientists from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research shared research showing that sea levels now seem all but certain to rise by at least 3 feet by the century’s end and will continue rising after that.

Most disconcerting, the congress concluded that we face “an increasing risk of abrupt or irreversible climate shifts.”

These findings led to the meeting’s second key conclusion: Rising temperatures are already causing and will produce increasingly larger social, political and economic disruptions. Millions of people will be forced to flee coastal areas flooded by rising sea levels. Millions more will migrate from drought and flood-stricken regions of the world. Wildfires and other dislocations will batter still others as the century unfolds.

Closely linked with the second conclusion is a third: Climate change will increasingly have disproportional effects on the poor and most vulnerable among and within societies.

It was these initial findings that led Stern, who led the British government's review of the global economic impacts of climate change, to say that high carbon growth kills itself. We now know that using fossil fuels to power our economies is self-destructive.

To avoid the worst of these effects, the congress concluded in its fourth finding that "rapid, sustained and effective" reductions in carbon emissions must be achieved.

Emissions must be slashed by 80 percent or more — and the United States and other industrialized nations have a special responsibility to do so. Because the risks of triggering tipping points in the Earth's climate increase each year, cuts made in the immediate future are more important than those made later in the century. In short, get on with it now.

The fifth finding of the congress provides an optimistic note and is aimed directly at citizens, businesses and policymakers — not just those attending next December's UN climate summit but also officials in Lane County, the Oregon Legislature and elsewhere: "There is no excuse for inaction."

Most of the tools, technologies and behavioral changes needed to decarbonize the economy already exist. In addition, decarbonization will produce benefits such as job growth, improved public health and healthier ecological systems. The Congress found that we know how to cut emissions and doing so will benefit everyone — there is no excuse for delay.

Of course, numerous obstacles stand in our way. This is the sixth and final key finding of the congress. To reduce the risks of runaway climate change and capture the opportunities provided by the shift to a low-carbon economy, we must make pointed efforts to overcome fear as well as inertia in our thinking, social and economic systems, governance mechanisms and leadership.

While it is not good news for Oregon, one lesson I took from the Congress is that the assessments of the likely biophysical impacts and costs of climate change recently completed for the state by my program at the University of Oregon are consistent with analysis done elsewhere around the globe.

But the most important message was the Congress's fifth: Neither our current financial troubles nor any other issue are sufficient reasons for delaying emission reductions. The world is teetering on the brink of irreversible climate change. We must rise above our current difficulties and solve this problem before it is too late.

The scientific congress was needed because the last synthesis of information on climate science was the 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which relied on research completed earlier in the decade. Important new information that has emerged since that time may influence policy decisions.

Because any increase in average temperatures above 3.6 degrees will produce serious harm, the European Union has adopted the goal of limiting global temperature increases to that level. However, during the final plenary Stefan Rahmstorf from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research told Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen that even a 3.6-degree increase leaves about a 30 percent chance of catastrophic impacts. In other words, the lower the better.

In 57 separate follow-up sessions to come as the congress continues, the full range of climate change science and policy issues will be discussed.

New research on the contribution of increased carbon emissions on sea-level rise will be debated, for example, as will the technical possibilities for improved energy efficiency and renewable energy production in developed and developing nations.

Methods for ensuring that emission cuts are accomplished equitably, and strategies for increasing climate literacy and mobilizing individual and collective action, will also be analyzed.

To reach an agreement worthy of the job, world leaders must remove the blinders that prevent them from seeing what uncontrolled climate change will mean for their nations. Many scientists view the scientific congress as one of the last chances to clarify what's at stake.

Let's hope that officials listen carefully and adopt the strong binding accord needed to control climate change.