

Climate change actions can't wait

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Despite the economic downturn, now is the time to enact strong policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. That is the most important conclusion to be drawn from a new study from Susan Solomon, one of the world's leading climate scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

In their report in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Solomon and her co-authors said that if human-induced carbon dioxide emissions continue to be emitted at their current pace, the effects will last for a thousand years — or in their terms, be “irreversible” — because carbon dioxide persists in the atmosphere and the oceans for a long time, and the interactions between the two can produce unchangeable sea level rise, droughts and other effects.

In some ways, this information is not new. Climate scientists long have known that high atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ from fossil fuels will produce long-lasting disruptions in the climate.

The real significance of Solomon's study is its not-so-subtle message of the urgent need to slash emissions. It's still not too late to prevent global warming from becoming irreversible. But if we don't act swiftly and boldly, it soon will be.

If we begin to immediately ratchet down emissions, the world is still likely to experience a temperature increase of somewhere between 1 degree to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit in the coming decades. This is already in the pipeline, and many scientists are convinced we are committed to the higher levels.

Even the lower level will have significant adverse economic, social and ecological consequences. Every level of government, private firm and household should begin to prepare now for those impacts.

But these consequences will seem trivial compared to the impacts that will result if emissions are allowed to continue to rise as they have for the past few decades. Once emissions rise too high, Solomon said, it will be very difficult to reverse course and restabilize the climate.

We will have committed the world to everlasting adverse climate change.

Twice in the past few weeks I have been asked to speak at hearings held by the Oregon House and Senate committees dealing with the climate bills about my University of Oregon program's climate impact studies. After my testimony I listened as utility, business, and nonprofit executives trotted up to the podium to give their views of the climate bills.

Nearly every speaker acknowledged the need to reduce emissions. But the agreement ended there.

Although many technical concerns were raised, one of the most common themes was implicit or open opposition to the adoption of emission reduction policies, and cap and trade in particular, in tough economic times.

After the hearings I asked the leaders of the two committees — state Sen. Jackie Dingfelder, D-Portland, and Rep. Ben Cannon, D-Portland — what they thought the major barriers were to passing climate protection legislation this year. Both agreed that the economic downturn was perhaps the key stumbling block.

“The economy will be the biggest issue,” Cannon said.

But Solomon's study puts the current economic crisis in a different context.

It is now clear that the longer we delay serious efforts to cut emissions, the greater the risk will be that we are committing our

children to a world of permanent and ever worsening climate change. The costs of allowing this to happen will be astronomical.

There are other reasons as well for aggressively moving forward on emission reduction policies.

Angus Duncan, chairman of the Oregon Global Warming Commission, pointed out that we don't suspend enforcement of electrical or fire codes, food safety rules or employee safety rules during tough economic times. Climate change is a vital public safety and public health issue as well, and we must not suspend efforts to control the problem now.

Jobs are another reason not to delay. When the economy is hurting, we want to put people back to work. We also want to help them cut costs. Policies that require emissions to be trimmed will spur energy efficiency improvements that would create jobs and save households and businesses money.

Strong climate policies also would help the renewable energy industry grow. Investments in renewable energy grew from \$80 billion in 2005 to a record \$100 billion in 2006 and more in 2007. But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Aggressive emissions reduction policies are certain to unleash massive investments that lead to the commercialization of thousands of new renewable energy products. Just think of the new businesses and jobs this would create.

So the risks of inaction on climate change are extremely high. Yet, the benefits and opportunities offered by strong action also are great.

If there was ever a time for thinking beyond our short-term interests, it's now.

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