

It's time to get past 'urgency denial'

By Jim Warren

GUEST COLUMNIST

Severe climate changes are occurring at an accelerating rate. Our planet is in crisis, according to the world's top scientists, and corrective measures that are proven, feasible and economically beneficial -- mainly energy efficiency -- need to be implemented now.

In 2008, the media and the public finally acknowledged that climate change is a serious problem, but now "urgency denial" is setting in. The gap between scientific and public understanding of the central aspects of the crisis actually widened last year. A Gallup poll showed that fewer Americans, 37 percent, were concerned about climate change than in 2007.

This is largely due to a lack of U.S. news coverage of a series of alarming scientific reports that support the argument by NASA expert James Hansen that, "We are running out of time" for correcting this accelerating planetary emergency.

The information deficit is fueling a dangerous misperception -- one promoted by CEOs such as Duke Energy's Jim Rogers -- that we have decades to slow global warming. This fallacy has become the dominant narrative nationally, as energy corporations, along with their elected and nonprofit allies, promote fictional "clean coal" and corporate-friendly "cap-and-trade" schemes.

Such delaying tactics, if successful, will virtually ensure that we reach tipping points that Hansen says "will cause rapid changes out of humanity's control" and lead to "a different planet." If we cross that threshold, the choice between solar, coal, wind or nuclear power will barely matter.

Unfortunately, many news stories and even accounts by environmental groups still describe climate change as "in the future." While record-breaking weather extremes and their results, such as wildfires, are increasingly prominent in the national news, their connection to climate change is rarely mentioned. Climate studies that do make the news are rarely placed within the context of clear scientific evidence showing the gravity of the climate crisis.

Among the key 2008 developments ignored or under-reported by the U.S. news media are:

- 1) Atmospheric CO₂ levels are already 10 percent higher than normal, and that major reductions in emissions are urgently needed, according to reports by Hansen's NASA team.
- 2) Two separate teams of European researchers report that millions of tons of methane are bubbling into the atmosphere as the Arctic floor has begun to thaw. This could trigger a dramatic advance of global warming, and it supports concerns reported in 2006 by the University of Pennsylvania's Richard Alley that "global warming can bring climatic turbulence, with changes coming in big jumps rather than gradually."
- 3) Arctic ice thickness has plummeted. Just a few years ago, scientists warned that summer Arctic

sea ice could be gone by 2100. Since 2007's dramatic record-breaking summer melt, some experts warn that it could disappear by 2012. In 2008, the extent of surface melting was slightly less than 2007, but the overall volume of ice (including thickness) broke previous records.

4) Sea level is rising. British researchers warn that sea level could rise nearly five feet this century, based on new understanding about polar ice sheets. This is far more than forecast in 2007 by the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

5) U.S. weather extremes are increasing. A U.S. government report on extreme weather warns that human-induced climate change is making heavy downpours more intense, that abnormally hot weather is likely to become more frequent, and that wildfires in the American West are "strongly associated with increased spring and summer temperatures and correspondingly earlier spring snowmelt in the mountains."

Rep. Ed Markey, the chairman of the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, said, "There is no safe haven. There is no place you can live that won't suffer the consequences of global warming.... People have been watching huge floods, droughts, storms that are otherwise unaccountable and historic in their nature."

6) Global weather disasters have quadrupled since 1987. British-based charity Oxfam International reported this in late 2007, but it remains off the U.S. radar screen. Oxfam says, "This is no freak year. It follows a pattern of more frequent, more erratic, more unpredictable and more extreme weather events that are affecting more people."

R.K. Pachauri, the head of IPCC, concludes: "The cities, power plants and factories we build in the next seven years will shape our climate in mid-century. We have to act now ... to change the way we use energy ... and thereby avert nothing less than an existential threat to civilization."

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