

One Earth, one future: the folly of fiddling while Earth warms

Originally appeared in the Fort Collins Coloradoan on December 5, 2013

In A.D. 64, flames consumed most of Rome. The Emperor Nero, reputed to have played his fiddle while his City burned, was thought to have started the Great Fire of Rome himself, to clear land for his planned palace. His "fiddling while Rome burns" is an apt analogy to today's failure by the U.S. Congress and many others in positions of responsibility to act to stem global warming. Upon the release of the 2012 World Bank report, "Turn Down the Heat," the bank's president, Jim Young Kim, summarized its gravity: "If there is no action soon, the future will be bleak. We need to get serious fast to avoid catastrophe."

The science of climate change is crystal clear. Every single national and major scientific institution in the world recognizes the reality of global warming and its human causes. The world's leading scientists issued their starkest warning yet this September, in the Fifth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Report. After carefully reviewing hundreds of recent research publications by more than 800 scientists, they find global warming to be "unequivocal" and "already causing enormous problems for our planet, which will only worsen." In Colorado, we are experiencing many of these problems: devastating record floods, droughts, wildfires, water shortages, the spread of tropical diseases like West Nile and forest devastation by the pine bark beetle (which flourishes in the absence of deep winter freezes). Late summer heat closed Poudre School District schools for the first time ever this year. Globally, more than a hundred million people will be refugees from flooding in coastal cities and low-lying countries as sea levels rise. Just this week, more than 10,000 people are reported to have died in the Philippines from the most powerful typhoon ever recorded.

Although governments have agreed we must avoid increasing global warming more than 2 degrees C (3.6 F) to avert disastrous climatic consequences, we are hurtling toward a 4 C rise by 2100. Current government and societal actions will not stem climate change. President Barack Obama recently called for urgent action to do more, but his Climate Action Plan does not go far enough. Congress, beholden to a well-funded climate change denial lobby, refuses to act.

The IPCC's policy message is crystal clear. Society must drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions and transform our energy system to avert catastrophic climate change. We must cut carbon emissions from power plants, halt drilling in the Arctic and stop the Keystone XL pipeline. The world's leading climate scientist, James Hansen, says we must keep 80 percent of the world's known fossil fuel

reserves in the ground, unburned, if we wish our children and their grandchildren to inherit a livable Earth.

We must enact science-based national legislation like the Climate Protection Act and Sustainable Energy Act, introduced by U.S. Sens. Bernie Sanders and Barbara Boxer last February. In Colorado, we must enact legislation like California's 2006 Global Warming Solutions Act. We must repudiate the insidious fiction of climate change denialism.

Climate change is the most important survival challenge of our times. The longer we delay action, the greater the risks and costs to the lives, economies and environment of present and future generations. Nero's moral crime of inaction pales before inaction on climate change.

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