

FACING A GRIM REALITY

The debate is over. Global warming is real.

Now, what are we going to do about it?

This is one of the largest, most difficult and most urgent questions facing humankind. The consequences of our answers will profoundly affect the quality of life for our descendants - not our distant descendants but our children and grandchildren here today whose lives are literally in our hands. Denial is no longer an option.

No one knows exactly how global warming will ultimately affect human beings, but there is almost universal scientific consensus that we will be facing profound changes. Predictions in the moderate range foresee impacts that wealthy societies could manage at a great economic cost, but would tear poorer countries asunder – rising oceans, fiercer storms, brutal heat waves, ecosystem disruptions and changing weather patterns that produce more drought and flood. Worst-case scenarios put forth by some reputable scientists are awful indeed – collapse of the food system and decline of civilization.

Reliable temperature records have been kept since 1850, and 2005 was officially the warmest yet. The predicted results of global warming are beginning to play out before our eyes. We now find ourselves presiding over a cascading extinction of plants and animals that share the planet with us.

A study that recently appeared in the scientific journal, *Nature*, has established a direct correlation between a warming climate and extinction. The study found that warmer weather over the last 20 years directly led to the extinction of 65 amphibian species. Hardest hit have been the beautiful, delicate, brilliantly-colored harlequin frogs. About 67 percent of harlequin frog species have been wiped out. While their loss doesn't impact the world economy, we are all poorer for their permanent absence.

Sea level rise is accelerating because glaciers in the northern hemisphere are melting faster than originally predicted. The amount of ice sliding into the sea from Greenland has doubled in the last five years. The island's contribution to sea level rise has doubled or tripled since 1996.

If all the glaciers on Greenland melt – a process that scientists previously thought would take about 1000 years but

now think could happen much sooner – sea level would rise about 23 feet inundating our coastal areas. Manhattan, Ocean City, New Jersey, Hilton Head, South Carolina, Key West – all under water. Even the worst skeptics can envision how that would impact the economy.

This past year's brutal heat wave in the south and southwest took its toll. Twenty-one people died in the Phoenix area, and 10 people, all of whom worked outdoors, died in California. Those deaths prompted the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board to adopt emergency regulations to require employers to provide more shade and rest breaks and plenty of water to workers who toil outside. In May and June, more than 500 people died of the heat in Pakistan and India.

And of course, there was the record-breaking hurricane season that brought us 15 hurricanes including five Category 4 and three Category 5 storms. Wilma was the most intense hurricane ever to form in the Atlantic. Katrina, Rita and Wilma were fearsome storms and along with the other hurricanes that made landfall resulted in at least \$100 billion in damage. The fate of New Orleans may be a harbinger for other coastal cities as the combination of warmer water and higher sea level combine to make them just as vulnerable.

A world in which we lose cities, watch plants and animals go extinct, and fill our morgues with the poor and elderly during summer heat waves would be a bitter legacy to leave our children. There is no faith tradition, no secular philosophy that will excuse such an outcome. No matter what our beliefs, we are all called to do everything we can to avert the worst of what a warming planet will bring to the future.

So it is paramount for us to take action to reduce the pollution that is causing global warming. To do that we must quickly move away from burning fossil fuels for most of our energy, and speed development of clean, renewable resources. We need to quickly deploy every device and practice available to reduce energy use and enhance efficiency. We need to capture methane and slash the amount of black soot going into the air. We need to approach this problem like the emergency that it is, and do everything that we can.

Pennsylvania's residents, businesses and industries can make a real difference. The Commonwealth generates

more global warming pollution than 106 developing countries combined. We need a visionary state plan that sets out reduction goals – starting with a modest goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010, at the very least. That goal is very achievable, since it means we would only need to reduce our overall emissions by three percent or less. And with the serious engagement of our elected leaders, the business community, industry,

agriculture, religious and secular leaders and the environmental community, we can. Every Pennsylvania family that wants a decent future for its children has a stake in the success of such a plan.

We know what we have to do – face reality and take action. Denial is not an option.