

STATEMENT OF SENATOR FRANK R. LAUTENBERG
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION
HEARING ON CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS
Wednesday, March 10, 2004

Mr. Chairman:

I want to thank you for convening today's hearing on the impacts of global climate change. It's vital that we better understand both the current and the future impacts of this phenomenon. Even as the "climate" itself is pervasive, the effects of global warming are equally widespread and affect our health, our economy, and our environment. The failure of some elected officials to acknowledge these impacts is at best myopic and at worst grossly irresponsible.

Ignoring the accumulation of thirty years of science may serve the narrow, shortsighted interests of a few but in the long run it will harm us all.

New reports and scientific updates on the impacts of climate change provide fresh evidence that our world is undergoing dramatic change and that humankind is primarily responsible.

Many of us were dismayed, but not surprised, by the news last October of the breakup of the Arctic's largest ice shelf—the nearly mile-long Ward Hunt Ice Shelf which had lost 90 percent of its mass since 1907. Since 1950, the average thickness of the Arctic's ice has decreased by a staggering 40 percent. Without doubt we will continue to hear about more ice shelf break-ups.

When I traveled to Antarctica some years ago I saw unprecedented ice cap melting which for me drove home the harsh reality of global climate change.

Some of the world's glaciers have lost as much as 70 percent of their ice. Globally, ocean levels have risen 4 to 8 inches. In some regions—such as around the Island of Fiji—the average ocean temperature has risen by a dramatic two degrees Fahrenheit. Temperature increases are a major reason for the loss of the beautiful and intricate coral habitat which our fisheries depend upon. There is also a very human face to climate change—we are seeing human suffering. Sheila Watt-Cloutier [Clu-te-a] Chairs the Circumpolar Conference that includes Alaska. Ms. Watt-Cloutier is a calm and reasonable spokesperson for the Inuit [in-u'-it] people and is not given to hysteria. That's why many listened when she recently said, "People worry about the polar bear becoming extinct by 2070 because there will be no ice from which they can hunt seals, but the Inuit face extinction for the same reason and at the same time. We are an endangered species, too."

She continued, "The ocean is too warm. Our elders, who instruct the young on the ways of the winter, are at a loss. Last Christmas after the ice had formed the temperature rose to 39 degrees Fahrenheit. We'd never seen that before."

The Inuit are experiencing severe difficulties because the permafrost is melting. The foundations of Inuit houses are crumbling, fresh-water lakes—an important food source—have been lost, and seashores are eroding—forcing whole communities to move inland, disrupting their traditional life. Airport runways, roads and harbors are collapsing.

This is not a projected scenario for some distant, uncertain date. It's been happening for years. The message here is simple: we must do more than "study" global climate change. The time has come to act.

The recently leaked Pentagon report on the potential scenarios which could play out around the earth—drought, famine, riots, and wars fought for survival rather than religion or ideology—painted a grim future.

But such societal deterioration does not have to happen. With America's wealth, technological expertise, and capacity to innovate, we could be leading the charge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—not following behind.

Global warming is serious. Its consequences are serious. And we must be equally serious in our efforts to reduce this threat.

Mr. Chairman, I applaud your leadership on this issue. You clearly understand that we don't have time to waste. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
