A Year to Remember: Facing the Truth about Climate Change

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Several events this August have underscored the vulnerability of even advanced industrial societies to climatic events. A heat wave in France that has claimed thousands of lives and has also forced the temporary closing of several nuclear power plants. An unusually hot day with added demand for air conditioning has triggered an electric power blackout over much of the Northeastern US and Ontario. These events have come in a year with a seeming abundance of weather related anomalies- severe rains in many parts of Europe, blistering heat-waves in parts of South Asia, and a profusion of tornadoes over large areas of the US. No single weather event can be ascribed to greenhouse enhanced global warming, but the likelihood and frequency of such events is steadily increasing in a rapidly warming climate.

These events underscore the inadequacy of the international response to climate change. If the Russian Federation decides to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, this treaty could come into force a few months from now. Yet even achieving this long-sought goal may prove to be a Pyrrhic victory. With the US and Australia refusing to ratify and the developing countries receiving a bye from binding emissions requirements, only about a third of global emissions are likely to be subject to Kyoto limitations. The utility of the Protocol is further limited by the absence of effective compliance mechanisms. A more promising and comprehensive route forward was suggested by the Renewable Energy Task Force of the G-8, which sought to focus attention on the needs of two billion people lacking access to electricity. Yet this very thoughtful report was released only two months before 9/11and has receded from policy maker attention.

Most disturbing has been the adoption of an ostrich-like approach to climate change by the Bush Administration and many of its supporters in Congress and industry. Reasonable people can certainly differ on the efficacy of Kyoto. They can no longer question, however, the basic science of climate change. The Administration’s effort to wish the problem of climate change away by obscuring or tampering with the science is therefore an inexcusable betrayal of public trust. The Bowdlerization of an EPA report on the environment to excise most references to climate change appears to have been only the beginning of the Administration’s

climate censorship. We have recently learned that the Competitive Enterprise Institute and key White House officials have joined forces in an effort to remove from government websites crucial information on climate change including the National Assessment report issued three years ago after extensive input from scientists and stakeholders throughout the US.

Anticipating this threat to the public's right to know, the Climate Institute several months ago initiated an effort to build the most comprehensive source of information on the Internet both on the impacts of climate change and on air quality levels worldwide. On August 8, just after the Competitive Enterprise Institute sued the government to prevent it from disseminating the National Assessment, the new compilation was available on our site, www.climate.org. This compilation is a work in progress. Working with scientists around the world and air quality specialists such as our partner SIMA in Mexico, we hope to give citizens around the world a user-friendly way of understanding what is at risk from manmade air and greenhouse pollutants. There is one lobby that is much stronger than an army of conservative think tanks and fossil fuel producers: the mothers and fathers of the children who breathe polluted air and will have to live on a blighted planet.

Unfortunately many major environmental groups in the US have tended to shy away from a discussion of climate change impacts. Instead they have focused their attention on arcane details of climate change policy such as emission baselines and delineation of allowable sink credits that are unlikely to resonate with the broader public. Recently, however, there has been an encouraging groundswell at the grassroots to educate the public on both climate and climate change. A particularly welcome initiative is Climate Day in the State of Pennsylvania. In its fifth year, this effort has involved thousands of students in mid-April in discussions of climatic issues or projects involving weather or climatic observations. Activity of this sort in other states may build a broader realization among the public that our actions are shaping the future of our climate.

Today Mexico City has the most comprehensive on line information on air quality of any major city on an NGO site, www.sima.com.mx . Within the next year similar information is likely to be available from air quality monitors in other Mexican cities, enabling the once close-to-the-vest Mexican government to become a model of transparency. This model may spread quickly- the Ministry of the Environment of Pakistan has expressed interest in having a similar system in place. Making climate and air quality data readily available to the public finesses two major hurdles to effective climate

protection.

First, it avoids the Alphonse- Gaston problem of who goes first. Armed with accurate information, people in Mexico City, Karachi, Beijing, Houston and Toronto will press their governments to make the changes in energy policy necessary to improve local air quality. At the same time, those changes will produce climate protection benefits that will be shared with the rest of the world. Second, a coordinated climate and air quality protection strategy addresses the challenge of intergenerational equity. Voters today - the elderly, asthmatics, and parents of vulnerable children – may move politicians to clean up fouled air; as they do, generations yet unborn will reap the benefits of a better climate in the future.

Besides building public awareness of what is at risk, a successful international climate protection effort requires models of innovative action at the national level. Already several small island states including St. Lucia, Dominica and Grenada are working to build economies based on renewable energy. Over the next several years we at the Climate Institute hope to expand this effort by helping the island countries develop integrated strategies that include greenhouse mitigation, adaptation and emergency response measures. We are also encouraged by the interest the Government of Pakistan has indicated in aggressively developing distributed renewable energy resources to meet the needs of many Pakistanis who today lack access to electricity.

The relatively mild weather changes that the world has experienced this year could be a precursor of more extreme and disruptive changes in the future such as shifts in ocean circulation patterns, large scale releases of methane from the tundra or the oceans, or dramatic increases in climate variability. By making more people aware of what is at risk and working with developing countries to implement clean energy strategies at acceptable cost, we may help avert those more extreme changes. The events of 2003 have highlighted our vulnerability to sharp swings in the weather. It is time for all of us to face up to the risks of climate change and to take the steps necessary to reduce those risks.