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N.C. can't outlaw global climate change

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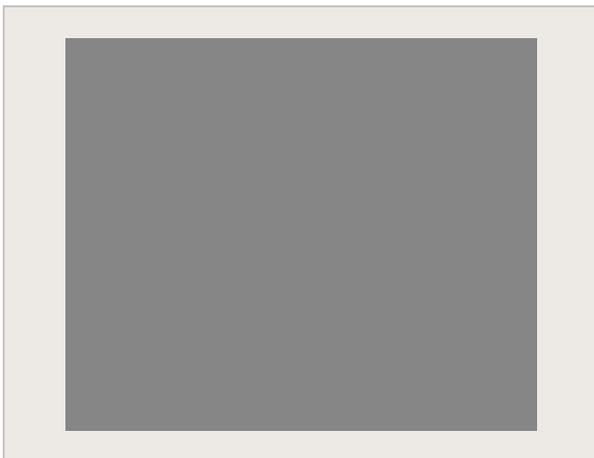
BY ALAN I. LESHNER AND WILLIAM L. CHAMEIDES

Tags: North Carolina | General Assembly | sea level | sea level rise | climate change | science

The recent decision of North Carolina's legislature to disregard projections of sea-level rise reflects a major problem in our society: Nationwide, too many people still refuse to accept the scientific facts about global climate change.

Among scientists, there is virtually no disagreement that global climate change is real, it is under way now, and humans are contributing to it. Yet over the past few years, the percentage of Americans who still reject scientific evidence of climate change has hovered around 30 percent, according to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

Our understandable fears about climate change, and in some cases, our political ideologies are apparently preventing us from taking action to combat a real problem that has been well-documented and supported by a vast body of scientific evidence. Especially amid severe financial constraints, we all wish for a climate reality that requires no action. Unfortunately, wishing will not make it so.



The potential consequences of climate change - including widespread coastal flooding, more intense storms, lethal heat waves, droughts and rampant wildfires - almost certainly would be more costly and life-threatening than inaction. According to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Chief Jane Lubchenco, for only the third time since hurricane records started in 1851, two hurricanes formed over the North Atlantic before the season officially began June 1. While wildfires burned in the West and

corn stalks shriveled in the Midwest, an astounding 3,282 daily high-temperature records across the nation were either tied or broken in June. Lubchenco has said that while it is impossible to attribute any single weather event to climate change, the overall pattern of extreme events we are experiencing is consistent with the predicted effects of climate change.

The facts are clear. Carbon dioxide (CO2), a heat-trapping pollutant, is at record levels in our atmosphere -

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the highest in at least 800,000 years, NOAA's Earth System Research Lab has reported. Cars, power plants, factories and homes that burn fossil fuels continue to release record amounts of carbon dioxide into the air every year. Scientists who study the complicated picture of our planet's climate say CO2 in the atmosphere from two sources – burning fossil fuels and from deforestation – translate into extreme danger for the environment.

With every ton of CO2 that we add to the atmosphere we are committing the world to ever greater risks from climate change. That is why it is so critical that we begin to rein in CO2 emissions by turning to cleaner energy sources and preserving forests. Equally important is to prepare for the climate change we have already burned into the system.

In states like North Carolina with its broad low-lying coastline, one of the greatest threats is sea-level rise. Incorporating that threat into plans for coastal development in the state would seem to be reasonable and sensible course of action. And yet, in July the General Assembly instructed the state's Coastal Commission that it may not "define rates of sea-level change for regulatory purposes prior to July 1, 2016" and only after a state-appointed scientific panel completes an "updated" assessment of sea-level rise in the state. (Governor Perdue has until Thursday to decide whether to sign the bill into law.)

This is all despite the fact that the very same panel of scientists already has completed an assessment and recommended planning for a 3-foot rise in sea level by 2100. It's not a trivial issue – a 3-foot rise in sea level could threaten more than 2,000 square miles of coastal land. And planning for a rise of that magnitude could threaten the plans of developers who continue to set their sights on the North Carolina coast. Waiting will mean further infrastructural investments along the coast that will likely prove to be ill-advised.

Climate change can be a scary prospect, and dealing with it will require economic dislocations – like reassessing plans to develop threatened coastal land. No wonder many people prefer to ignore the facts. There is a silver lining, though: Science and technology promise solutions and with those solutions new economic opportunities.

American ingenuity has helped make us an economic powerhouse, and it can now help us navigate our way through climate change. Many measures that would lessen the severity of climate change also offer other benefits.

Steps such as expanding renewable energy sources, relying more on public transportation and driving energy-efficient cars can make us less dependent on foreign oil, save us money and improve the quality of the air we breathe. Many regions already are making solutions happen, from Japan to California and from Inner Mongolia to Kenya and Scandinavia.

We owe it to ourselves to look closely at climate-change research. Certainly we should ask questions. But we must not let our fears or ideology trump well-verified, mainstream scientific knowledge. Our future well-being and prosperity depend on a clear-eyed understanding of climate-change risks and our options for combating them.

Alan I. Leshner is chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and executive publisher of the journal Science. William L. Chameides is dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University.

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