

Confronting the climate crisis

Joe Nathanson//May 3, 2024//



Another Earth Day has come and gone. April 22 marked the 54th anniversary of the first Earth Day, which was held to bring public awareness to the threats posed by pollution of our air, the fouling of our waterways, and the degradation of our land by noxious chemicals and industrial waste.

That heightened awareness did bring change in the early 1970s. The Clean Air Act was passed, the Clean Water Act was enacted, and the Environmental Protection Agency was established to provide enforcement mechanisms for reaching the goals set out by that federal legislation.

And some progress was made. Some cities with severe air pollution have made significant progress in reducing smog, particulates and other contributors to poor air quality. According to EPA data on major metropolitan areas, St. Louis, Louisville, Birmingham, and Pittsburgh were the leading regions with notable improvement in their air quality during a recent 10-year period.

There has also been generally good news about the ozone layer. This region in the Earth's stratosphere provides protection from the most harmful ultraviolet radiation. As the result of the United Nations Montreal Protocol adopted in 1987, a significant reduction in ozone-depleting substances has been achieved in the ensuing years and the dangerous hole in the ozone layer has become smaller.

But during the latest revolution of planet Earth around the sun, there has been a record number of weather and climate disasters.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in 2023 the United States experienced a record number of 28 weather and climate disasters, each causing \$1 billion or more in damage across the country. These events collectively caused nearly 500 deaths.

One of the worst events occurred last August in Hawaii, where a series of wildfires broke out on the island of Maui.

I remember the beautiful seaside town of Lahaina, where I vacationed some 20 years ago. It was there on Maui's northwest coast that wind-driven fires prompted evacuations, caused widespread property damage, and the loss of at least 101 lives. Those wildfires have been attributed to dry, gusty conditions created by a strong high-pressure area north of Hawaii and Hurricane Dora to the south.

NOAA's 2023 list includes 17 severe weather or hail events and four flooding events. Among other notable weather anomalies, in California a series of nine atmospheric river events caused significant flooding, power outages and mudslides leading to at least 21 deaths and an estimated 1,400 rescues.

Significant flooding events were also recorded in both the Northeast and the Fort Lauderdale region of Florida. NOAA's full accounting of these events costing \$1 billion or more include two tropical cyclones, two tornado outbreaks, a winter storm, and a drought and heat wave event.

NOAA reports that the total cost for these 28 disasters was \$92.9 billion, but they note the total may rise by several billion dollars when the costs of the December 16-18, 2023, East Coast storm and flooding event are fully accounted for.

The toll of these events is also showing up in sharp jumps in the cost of insurance premiums for residential and commercial properties and the withdrawal by some insurance companies from certain regions because of wildfire risks or repeated flooding hazards.

I am amazed at times, even in professional circles, that raising the issue of climate change can be seen as too controversial or "too political." Folks, it's not about politics; it's about

accepting the accumulated science that has identified the burning of fossil fuels as a main contributor to the warming of the planet and the consequential climate-related disasters.

The legitimate political issues should relate to matters of how and how much we are willing to pay as a society to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Let us hope as we continue our latest spin around the sun that we will be spared the worst effects of a warming planet. But let us also hope, as we approach Earth Day 2025, that we will find more social cohesion and willingness to take on the tough measures that will allow our “blue marble” to continue to be habitable for flora, fauna and humankind.

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