

Climate change comes to Wyoming”

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A cloudless sky that’s an immense blue dome over Wyoming is rare these days though eighteen years ago, when I taught in Tennessee and spent summers in Wyoming, I always looked forward to greeting Wyoming’s azure skies. Now, when a red fireball of sun rises through a smear of haze, I know that firefighters somewhere have been unable to contain a blaze.

Pollution isn’t the only problem. Extended cloud covers develop because, on a warming planet, more water evaporates from streams, reservoirs, lakes, and the soil. Add the water vapors from power plants and refrigeration units, and it’s no wonder that the huge influx of moisture turns into clouds. Tornados, condensation funnels, and more violent storms are the result.

When eighteen tornados were spotted in Wyoming on June 12, it should have served as a wake-up call. Not that this was the first time we were shaken awake to the facts of a warming homeland. A few years ago the pine-bark beetle outbreaks gave ample warning. Already it’s forgotten or shrugged off.

I asked Dennis Baker, who raises organic wheat in dry-land farming near Chugwater, what changes he has observed in his many years of farming.

“Springs are getting shorter,” he said. “This year we had rain early on, but then it quit. And that’s been the pattern.” Reluctant to ascribe the problem to human activity, Baker prefers to think of it as a prolonged drought that’s nature’s way. He pointed out that plants thrive on CO₂.

I reminded him that, when plants die, including the millions of trees killed by the pine-bark beetles, they give off the CO₂ they had stored. Eventually Baker allowed that minimizing the human impact on “nature’s way” may not be a bad idea.

“I used to be against diesel regulation,” he said. “But you know what? We no longer have diesel engines belching those clouds of black fumes.”

Newt Russell’s wheat farm lies near Wheatland, where dry-land farming has been practiced for generations. “We’re in trouble,” he said last month. “Last year we didn’t get the fall rains for the seeds to sprout. All the wheat farmers around here are hurting. From my acreage, only a tiny percentage is harvestable.” He, too, was dismissive of human activity affecting climate change, attributing the warming to a cyclical pattern.

“There’s no debate among scientists that climate change is happening and that human activity is the main cause,” writes Christy Gerrits, a retired science teacher from Gillette, in a recent issue of Powder River Breaks. Gerrits urges residents and political leaders to support the Clean Power Plan. The Plan isn’t perfect; still, it “allowed Wyoming to reduce carbon pollution from power plants on its own terms” while encouraging the state to diversify with clean, renewable energy from sun and wind.

“Climate change is here and right in our faces,” Andrew Nikiforuk’s “Empire of the Beetle” quoted a frustrated Wally MacFarlane during the Yellowstone beetle devastation. “You don’t have to go to the polar icecaps. All you gotta do is look up the mountain.” The collapse of the whitebark-pine community in Greater Yellowstone brought on pine deaths in “2,500 drainage basins over an area the size of South Carolina,” writes Nikiforuk; in some areas, “the beetles exterminated more than 162 trees per acre, or 92 percent of all trees greater than five inches in diameter.” Beetle outbreaks are the consequence of “human folly,” his book’s subtitle suggests.

Millions of dead logs provide the fuel for more intense wildfires. The Keystone fire in the Medicine Bow National Forest raged all through July and into early August, feeding on the “heavy fuel” of beetle-killed trees. “The fire behavior will remain active due to continued dry conditions,” said a mid-July update. At the time, the blaze had burned more than 3.6 square miles of timber. Beetle-killed trees dry out and become brittle, making it more dangerous for fire crews to fight the flames, said Section Chief Rob Powell.

UW Professor Jeffrey Lockwood, who recently spoke in Cheyenne, discussed his latest book, “Behind the Carbon Curtain.” Carbon dioxide, pumped into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels is warming the planet, he said. The rise in atmospheric greenhouse gases has led to higher winter temperatures, which was insufficient to kill off the beetle outbreak, and the decomposing dead trees further add to atmospheric carbon, making the winters warmer.

“I’ve been a student at UW’s School of Energy Resources since 2014,” says Cody DeBoer, who works part-time for a solar company. The school was created in 2005 to serve the needs of the fossil fuel industry, yet its fossil-fuel division currently has only two students enrolled while Renewable Energy Division holds “about two dozen,” he says. “My generation is stuck with the climate mess. What are we supposed to do? Sit on the sidelines, watch things go from bad to worse?”

DeBoer was part of a recent delegation to Washington that pitched carbon-fee-and-dividend legislation. “It’s only a matter of time before fossil-fuel companies are held responsible for a tax,” he said.

Norway has had a carbon tax since 1990.