

WTE Column of Dec. 31, 2014. Editor's headline: "Wyo. should prepare for climate change"

Falling oil prices—and falling interest in coal—brings new challenges to the Cowboy State. It behooves us to address these challenges soberly. Such was a recent Caspar Star-Tribune message, reiterated by Wyoming TribuneEagle's "Tell us what you think" editorial.

The Wyoming Outdoor Council's Spring 2014 "Frontline" publication offers similar, albeit more extensive, assessments.

"It's tough not to consider coal a good neighbor," writes Richard Garrett after enumerating the many benefits of electricity his family and neighbors enjoy. His article, "We Need to Talk Plainly About Coal and Climate Change," pegs coal as "not a good neighbor" when contribution to climate change is "coal's darkest side."

Wyoming must address the dark side as we move into the future. Our leaders—and we ourselves—should begin the conversation right away. "The time has come for us to talk plainly with our longtime neighbor, coal, and be good neighbors to each other."

In the publication's cover story, "Let's Drive Innovation Now, While We Can Afford it," Chris Merrill urges Wyoming to avoid West Virginia's head-in-the-sand to coal's diminishing role in its economy. "Our politicians never really did look ahead . . . for when coal wouldn't be king," he quotes a county sheriff. In Wyoming, while energy research at our university continues to make strides thanks to funding, the challenge of climate change has gotten short shrift.

As demand for workers in the auto industry collapsed, Detroit acted similarly, the author notes. Instead of efforts to reinvent itself, Detroit acted with complacency. In 2013, the city was forced to file for bankruptcy.

"Wyoming could be the Silicon Valley of energy innovation," writes Merrill. We need a new approach, and not just to coal. Rather, we must "cut down on greenhouse-gas emissions from oil and gas operations . . . require leak detection and repair, statewide, for all phases of natural gas development and delivery." Methane constitutes an extraordinarily potent greenhouse gas, he points out; hence, capturing it makes sense for consumers, businesses, and the environment alike.

Merrill regrets former Rep. Matt Teeters's budget-bill footnote that blocked adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards in Wyoming's schools. Teeters believed teaching global warming as a fact would "wreck Wyoming's economy" among other "unwanted political" ramifications.

None of Wyoming's political leaders are climate scientists, Mr. Merrill reminds us. Ignoring climate science in the education of Wyoming's students is both "economically shortsighted" and "dangerously complacent." We should remember the lessons of Detroit and West Virginia and prepare for the new reality. "Wyoming has the capacity and the will to do better."

Encouraging science, creative problem solving, and energy tech innovation must gain prime consideration. Among other things, this will ensure jobs and revenue in Wyoming's future. By seizing the opportunity while we're on top, Wyoming can be a leader. Now is the time to "reinvent our economy and leverage our current prosperity to bring about future success."

The close of 2014 brought encouraging news. For one thing, the voters of Goshen County drove home an unambiguous message when they refused to reelect Mr. Teeters in November. For another, the coming legislative session will consider a bill seeking to repeal the NextGen Science ban by removing the footnote, so that "the State Board of Education can continue with its work uninterrupted by the legislature," states its sponsor, Rep. John Patton.

At the end of the year, the urgency of climate change was driven home by the U.N. weather agency's report that 2014 was on track to be the hottest year on record. Although Wyoming's recent cool summer was not a recipient of that heat, this doesn't mean we can afford to ignore climate change as a serious threat to the future of our children. The most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change would suggest that we have passed the point of no return.

By 2047 we'll exist in historically unprecedented climates, the scientists warn. Global temperatures are projected to rise 3.6 Fahrenheit degrees within the next generation and 7.2 degrees within ninety years. Unprecedented climate-disruption events are expected to cause food riots and waves of refugees.

Such forecasts may not seem pertinent to Wyoming, but consider this: In the 1960s, the federal government recorded 18 weather-related major disasters annually, hurricanes to wildfires. From 2000 to 2010, the annual average had jumped to fifty-six. In 2011, the federal government declared a record 94 weather-related major disasters, costing the Treasury billions per week.

The question is no longer whether global warming exists or how to stop it, but how to deal with it. It's a question every Wyomingite must answer. We have the resources to face these challenges. As a global community, Wyoming must address climate change.