

Will droughts force harsh restrictions on water use? We need courageous leaders to overcome resistance

By JOHN PASSACANTANDO

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Scientists have been warning us for years about many things that can happen if we don't stop global warming, including things we are seeing all too much of right now.

They include phenomena such as thousand-year-old heat records being broken, melted Arctic ice the size of Texas in the past 19 years, increasingly severe droughts and floods, a massive die-off of the world's great coral reefs, and accelerated sea-level rise in recent years.

But while industry hacks try to confuse the public by saying that global warming isn't happening or won't hurt if it does, we often forget the threats to the clear water that flows out of our water spigot on demand.

Here's why you should push your politicians to stop global warming. It is as simple as this: all the best peer reviewed science from around the world on global warming comes up with the same conclusion about what to expect — an amplified hydrologic cycle.

That means the extra energy from the sun trapped in our atmosphere by global warming pollution not only heats things up but speeds up the cycle of evaporation and throws a wrench into other basic Earth systems. As a result, we end up with more frequent heavy rain and the potential for more severe extended droughts.

In other words, topsy-turvy weather. It looks like this is already happening. During the past 100 years, according to an analysis by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the occurrence of severe precipitation events (more than two inches in 24 hours) in the United States has increased 20 percent.

This still sounds rather bland until you realize how dependent our fresh drinking water is on predictable, steady rain and in some places snowmelt, not too much, not too little. When rain comes in extremes, the deluge can flush toxics, animal waste and fertilizers into streams and reservoirs.

Take North Carolina. This past

summer it experienced its worse drought since the Dust Bowl. Then came the floods from Hurricane Floyd, which washed dead pigs, pesticides and toxic waste across the beautiful state. Public water systems were so contaminated that they are still boiling their water in December.

Or California, where the large population on the coasts drinks water piped in from mountain reservoirs hundreds of miles away. The timing of spring (the snow melt) regulates the flow into these reservoirs. Scientists have shown that the melt is coming sooner than it did at the turn of the century, leaving things dry earlier in the summer.

Washington, D.C., watched its Potomac River nearly disappear this summer and neighboring Maryland introduced mandatory water restrictions as an insurance policy against the drought which destroyed a year's worth of crops.

When Gov. Parris Glendening told people to stop watering their lawns, suburbanites yelped. But to blame the

governor for taking such precaution is blaming the messenger for delivering bad news. What he did was right, and it helped save precious water during a real environmental emergency.

And this isn't just about making lemonade, washing your car or watering your petunias, but indeed our daily bread. Farmers couldn't be more dependent on reliable water supply or more aware of its whims and vagaries.

Unfortunately, if global warming continues to twist our weather, we will all get to know the hydrologic cycle a little more intimately. There is a way to prevent global warming, but it requires strong will and leadership.

A year from now, we will wade through the flotsam and jetsam of potential leaders during the 2000 election-year cycle and hopefully find the environmental champions we need.

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