



## The Climate Challenge [KUFM editorial 8/17/06]

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The British knew something was gravely wrong when a Medieval re-enactor in a suit of armor recently fried an egg on his breastplate. Sir Lancelot could never have done that. But Britain, and many other countries, are now shattering records for highest temperatures ever recorded. It is usually not possible to link any specific climatic event, such as a hurricane, a drought or a record temperature, in one place to global warming. Cumulatively, however, the conclusion is inescapable that there is a common root cause for a rapidly emerging weather crisis—human-generated buildup of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. These gases act as a blanket keeping the sun’s energy from reflecting back into space. This conclusion has been reached by the National Academies of Science of 14 nations, including that of the United States.

Our American mainstream media gives the big picture of global warming amazingly little attention while covering specific record heat waves around the United States. This heat wave has set new record highs for 50 American cities. Preoccupied by wars in the Middle East, media outlets are failing to connect the dots on the global warming crisis that will require a warlike mobilization and level of resolve to address.

It is increasingly hot almost everywhere. Just three years ago, there were thousands of heat-related deaths during a record hot spell in France. In the Netherlands, the Dutch meteorological institute reported that July will go down as the hottest on record since temperatures were first measured in 1706. Many regions of Germany are setting new highs with crop losses of up to 50 percent in the most stressed agricultural regions. In Australia, a 10-year drought has been nicknamed the big dry. Forest fires increasingly rage in Siberia and in the Rockies from Canada to Colorado and recent science has conclusively linked increased forest fires to global warming. Between 1980-2000, Siberian winters were 3.6 to 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than the pre-1960 norms. Recently published research has concluded that the vast Amazonian forest is now experiencing its second year of severe drought and is on the brink of irreversible collapse with catastrophic consequences for the world’s climate. Unless the drought abates, scientists fear that the catastrophic destruction could begin as early as next year.

Agricultural producers in eastern Montana are experiencing a seventh straight year of drought, many streams are closing to fishing to protect heat-stressed fish, and the glaciers in Glacier National Park are predicted to be gone in 25 years.

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Greenhouse gasses derive from activities we all do, from generating the electricity that lights our houses to driving our cars. It also derives from natural processes. A very serious problem is that our activities will accelerate these natural processes through feedback mechanisms. As global warming melts the permafrost, it exposes formerly frozen organic material to the air, which generates vast amounts of methane that accelerates warming. Increasing forest fires also pour more carbon into the atmosphere and scientists report a 10-30% increase over historic levels from this source alone. The increasingly arid Amazon forest holds an amount of carbon equal to 15 years of human emissions that will be released into the atmosphere if it burns. The heat this summer, led me to consider air-conditioning my house. Unfortunately, this would create another feedback as air-conditioners require more electricity, which is generated by coal-fired plants, which generate carbon dioxide, which causes still more warming. These and other feedback mechanisms create a “tipping point” that is defined as the point past which the feedback mechanisms will cause ever increasing amounts of future warming regardless of any extreme steps we find the will to take in the future. We have to address the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere now or it will be too late. After the tipping point is reached, humans and other species will have to try and find ways to **cope** with problems from global warming as it will be too late to **avoid** them.

Unfortunately, our national political leadership is in denial about global warming. Unlike many other countries, including Britain, we have not seen any national leadership from the United States on global warming. This means that we have to begin to implement local solutions that will reduce our slide toward the tipping point at which accelerating global warming becomes irreversible. Montana’s Governor Brian Schweitzer recognizes this and has appointed a task force of diverse interests headed by the director of Montana’s Department of Environmental Quality, Richard Opper. This task force will examine the problem during the next year and formulate recommendations for specific actions to reduce or sequester greenhouse gases.

In the meantime, a diverse group of Montanans will begin to explore what the implications of global warming are for Montana and what we here in Montana can do to begin the process of addressing this problem. Thirty-four groups, including conservation groups, agricultural interests, forest industry associations, recreation groups, government and academic groups, organized labor, and the cities of Missoula and Billings will co-sponsor a conference on the Montana Climate Challenge. This conference will be on September 22-24 in Helena and the concerned public is invited to attend. Visit the conference website at [www.MTclimatechallenge.org](http://www.MTclimatechallenge.org) for more details or call the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula at 406-721-6705. You can also search for the website using the search word Montana Climate Challenge. The website also includes lots of additional information about climate change.

If you’d rather continue to enjoy Montana’s natural beauty, and hunting and fishing, than fry eggs on a suit of armor, come to the conference and begin the process of finding out what you and Montana’s government can do, and should be doing, to address global warming.

This is Sterling Miller for the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula.

