

CLIMATE TALK

Climate Disasters Demand Bipartisan Action

Adam Zais
Ashland



Winter in the Chequamegon Bay is a beautiful sight. As I write these words, the frozen water is being slowly populated by a collection of ice houses. I'm fortunate to call the bay home for this winter - and hopefully many more. It's a peaceful, blessed quiet that is a long ways from ugly political gossip and sixteen lane gridlock - far away from Houston, Puerto Rico, the Columbia River Gorge, Northern California, and now Los Angeles, which is grappling with some decidedly un-quiet times.

It's important to tell the truth about the world by not oversimplifying. Climate change isn't the only driver of increasing forest fires (or floods, droughts, etc.) - a century of general forest mismanagement, urban sprawl, and fire suppression have certainly helped that problem along. It is, however, the proverbial elephant in the room that can't be ignored anymore. I've only fought fire for four seasons. Three of them have been "historical" summers. An old captain of mine said that he averaged 600 hours of overtime on an average season of hotshotting in the early 2000s. I've only had one season that slow, working on a considerably less elite crew.

Back to climate change and fire suppression. It's not just that it's warmer. It's that the world is connected, and if one string (climate) is pulled, a lot of other ones are incidentally plucked. Hotter and longer summers mean not only longer fire seasons, but more stressed trees and plants. Stressed trees are less fire resistant than healthy ones, and are also more likely to be dead from infections, disease, or insect damage. There are also more people in the world (and the woods) than in years past. People mean fires - from a stray cigarette to exploding transformer. All of this just adds literal tinder to the flames. In summary, fires are forecast to get much, much worse over the coming decades.

One trap, that's especially easy to fall into here in the Chequamegon Bay, is "SO WHAT!?!". We're a long ways from Los Angeles, and don't have to deal with flames burning over some Hollywood mansion. Or the mudslides that come from denuded hillsides. But we do. And we're going to foot the bill for it as a society - just like we always do. Just like we did for New Orleans, Hurricane Sandy, Puerto Rico, Houston, Northern California, and now Los Angeles.

I want to make it very clear that it's a privilege to help our fellow citizens rebuild. What we need to be sure of is to address the root cause of the problem while providing assistance to those affected. I've gutted homes that have been flooded twice in just over a year by different hurricanes (Irene & Sandy). It makes you question the sanity of your society.

The common denominator behind all of these disasters is climate change. Sure, there have always been storms, floods, fires and other disasters. This is different, however, in that it's accelerated by us. We bear unique responsibility for these acts of nature.

Although there are things that we can (and should!) do individually, there is only one way to effectively manage this problem. As a society, we need to put a price on carbon pollution. Readers - I implore you to consider the revenue-neutral Carbon Fee & Dividend proposal advocated by the non-partisan Citizens' Climate Lobby. The fee generated for carbon pollution is divided up and returned to the taxpayers

There is also a bipartisan caucus--the Climate Solutions Caucus--that is dedicated to managing the climate crisis. The (fast growing!) 66-member caucus also abides by the "Noah's Ark" Rule - a Democrat must bring a Republican, and vice versa. It's past time to get Congressman Duffy to join. After all . . . Who would want to live in a world perpetually without the Birkebeiner?

Adam spends summers fighting fires in the western U.S. He winters in Ashland, nordic skiing and renovating a historic art deco building. He graduated from Green Mountain College with a B.A. in Renewable Energy & Ecological Design.