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Opinion

Rural voters must care about climate

By Tim Palmer

Senators representing rural Oregonians walked off the job in June to prevent the state from addressing global warming. Claiming to act in the interest of their constituents, they did exactly the opposite.

Rural Oregonians — and I am one, in a county three hours southwest of Eugene — stand on the front line of damage from climate change. We will suffer the worst from state inaction. Red is the correct color to politically describe rural Oregon, and it's also the right color to symbolize the effects that a hotter climate is causing.

Consider first the hazard of wildfire and the pall of smoke we endure for months at a time. Hotter, drier, windier summers have delivered fires that no one can control. That makes any prescription for forest management irrelevant.

Climate models project that global warming will further exacerbate incendiary conditions. Some elected officials are apoplectic about fire. Yet the same officials reject meaningful action to grapple with global warming, which is the principal cause of the heightened risks we face.

Not concerned about fire? Consider the rising ocean. The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences forecast worldwide sea-level rise of up to six feet within the lifespan of our children. That will inundate real estate, estuaries needed for fisheries and big portions of towns along our coast. We rural Oregonians are the ones who will have to live with the effects of a rising ocean, saltwater intrusion of drinking water and landslides along 362 miles of Highway 101.

Worse, the overload of atmospheric carbon sourced in fossil fuels triggers ocean acidification, spelling doom to crabs, clams and the whole food chain. It will destroy commercial and sport fisheries that drive rural economies. Bad news, too, for freshwater fish: stream temperatures already climb to intolerable levels for salmon, steelhead and

trout. Outbreaks of toxic warm-water algae foul our swimming holes and domestic supplies.

Because global warming delivers less snow and more rain in western Oregon, floods will increase. This is important to rural Oregonians because a lot of them live in flood zones or, if they don't, they depend on roads that will be made impassible when rivers rise. In eastern Oregon, worsening droughts are predicted where water shortages already challenge farmers and ranchers trying to make a living.

Climate change benefits forest pathogens and the invasion of exotic species, reducing timber productivity and making forests more flammable with nuisance plants like gorse. Drier, hotter summers make regeneration difficult, with prospects of whole forests becoming brushy chaparral instead.

Republican politicians used fear about unaffordable gasoline prices to win the support of rural residents. But HB 2020 evolved through years of compromises that would offer tax credits to offset gas prices for financially stressed people, exempt farm and forestry use and prioritize multiple rural investments with money the program generates. To no avail; opponents of climate change action wouldn't even show up at the Capitol and let the next generation have a shot at a decent future here in rural Oregon.

Without decisive action to curb global warming, the Oregon we know will be ruined. The world's leading climate experts say we have a dozen years to turn the tide. No one — least of all elected officials — should be walking off the job. Legislators who stonewalled HB 2020 with their walkout postponed action for another legislative session. Time is precious. Every year of unfettered global warming brings us closer to suffering a future with problems that we never expected — and never wanted.

Whether out of belief in their own way of thinking, denial of the facts or influence from those who pay for political campaigns in rural Oregon, politicians who resist meaningful solutions to the climate crisis do a disservice to the people they represent and to all the generations of rural Oregonians to come.

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