

Executive Strategy: 120 months and counting

by Kevin Sweeney - 2.2.07

Climate change was an ascendant news topic in 2006. There were a number of reasons — the film “An Inconvenient Truth” among them — but the primary one is clear: The science of predicting the climate is getting better, and the predicted effects of climate change are getting worse.

Many of the models used in the last decade to predict climate change effects appear to have been accurate, though with one key flaw: The onset of these effects may be faster than previously expected. Justin Mundy, a British Foreign Office official, put it succinctly at a recent meeting in Washington: “We assumed we had the luxury of time. Sadly, that is no longer the case.”



Kevin Sweeney

It was barely five years ago that the consensus among climate scientists was that, without significant changes in global carbon emissions, the Arctic Ocean would be icefree by the end of this century. By the end of 2006, many of those scientists said we were more likely to see open seas in the Arctic by 2040. (Arctic ice reflects heat away from the earth's surface; its loss would cause more heat to be retained in our atmosphere. An effect of climate change could become a cause — one of the ironic “positive” feedbacks.)



James Hansen, NASA's chief climate scientist, first warned Congress about climate change in 1988. In 2006, he began saying we have 10 years in which to begin taking serious action if we're to avoid serious calamities. One example of what he considers a likely effect under a business-as-usual scenario: By the end of this century, 50 percent of the species that currently reside on earth will be extinct. If we take bold and quick action, Hansen says that number can be reduced to 10 percent, but there is that catch. We must make significant progress in the next 10 years — at least beginning the process of leveling off our carbon emissions — or the alternative scenario he offers is no longer viable. Without significant changes, we will create, in Hansen's words, “a different planet.”

We have 10 years to begin responding in earnest. 120 months.

The issue will remain in the news throughout 2007 and beyond. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will release various drafts of its fourth quadrennial report throughout the year, with new projections of climate impacts due out late in February.

Major business leaders, including the heads of some of America's largest companies, will push for strong federal legislation to set legal limits on carbon emissions.

Other efforts, now in the planning stages, will involve unexpected leaders talking about potential climate change impacts. Climate messages will no longer come exclusively from the environmental sector.

So what are business leaders to do? Make changes and push for changes.

Many executives will be pushing for a federally-mandated cap on carbon emissions because they fear a mixture of very different state regulations. Their motive may be self-protection for their business. If competing state regulations are likely over the next several years — and they

are — these business leaders are saying they would rather opt for consistency at the federal level.

Some executives may speak out because they know their customers care about it and will consider rewarding companies working on solutions. Some will take stands because they know their employees want to find meaning and value in their work; being on the right side of climate issues could be a real draw for some companies. There is another reason for executives to take action: Moving on climate issues can add meaning and value to their own lives.

The role of business leaders can be transformative. In October, I joined a delegation of three- and four-star admirals and generals who have retired from the U.S. military. Our purpose was to explore links between national security and climate change. We met with senior defense and foreign office officials and took meetings at 10 Downing Street. The most effective meeting, by far, was the one with business leaders. Their tone and credibility allowed them to break through the noise of a busy trip and endless meetings. Their words had weight, and, as a result, they were the ones who were best at engaging the American military leaders. They had the biggest impact.

Speaking out on this issue is safer than one might think. The issue, surprisingly, has become less political, at least in the short-term. For so long, the American debate on climate focused on the science: Progressives tried to bring visibility to the scientific consensus, and conservatives suggested that no such consensus existed. We were stuck in that standoff for the better part of a decade. But we're no longer stuck. To a very large extent, conservatives have stopped challenging the science. As a result, it's now difficult to come up with a quick description of a Democratic or Republican position on this issue (as one can with most issues). We're not polarized on this issue, at least right now.

By speaking out on climate change, and by pushing for quick and positive action, business leaders can help prevent the onset of polarization. And, more to the point, they may play a vital role in bringing us together.

© **Celilo Group Media**. All rights reserved. Permission is required for reproduction in whole or in part. For high-quality reprints of articles, contact FosteReprints at 866-879-9144 or via email: sales@FosteReprints.com

RELATED LINKS:

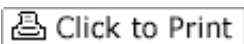
Green roofs grow the bottom line [Read More](#)

A push for truth in lobbying [Read More](#)

One week in November [Read More](#)

Find this article at:

<http://www.sijournal.com/commentary/5528141.html>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

©2006 Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance and Celilo Group Media. All rights reserved. Most written content may be reproduced for informational and educational purposes provided it is appropriately credited. Contact nwcurent editor Brian J. Back at 503-226-7798 or brian@celilo.net prior to republishing.