Our Ocean Backyard

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The Earth is on Fire

We just returned from some serious hot weather during our nearly three weeks in Greece, hot like in the 90s every day. And this a little cooler than two weeks earlier when Athens was well over 100° and authorities had to close the Acropolis because of heat stroke risk to the hundreds of people waiting to climb to the Parthenon. All of the Mediterranean was scorching and this wasn’t the first time. A year earlier temperatures exceeded 110 degrees in Seville, Spain. They became the first city in the world to initiate a heat wave naming and ranking system, much like hurricanes. That heat wave was named Zoe and was a category 3, their highest level.

In June of this year, an historic heat wave began baking an area extending from Texas across New Mexico, Arizona and into the California desert. Phoenix and the surrounding suburbs suffered longer than most other areas and broke a record with 31 daily highs over 110 degrees. Phoenix gets hot often, but this record shattered the one from 1974, 49 years earlier, which was 18 straight days of 110 degrees or higher. This serious Phoenix heat wave didn’t exactly end with cool weather, but the peak did dip slightly to 108 on the 32nd day.

While we missed the disastrous fires in Greece, we drove through many miles of scorched and barren landscape on our recent adventure. As I’m writing this CalFire reports that at least 381,169 acres have been burned this year to date in California, which is a little over half as much as the five-year average of acres burned by this time.

Florida was just seriously whacked by hurricane Idalia, which fortunately made landfall at a relatively unpopulated section of the state. This was the eighth major hurricane to hit the Gulf Coast in the last six years, and it likely won’t be the last as this year’s hurricane season hasn’t peaked yet. Tropical Storm is Lee is on a path that could impact Florida, but hurricane paths are notoriously difficult to predict very far in advance. Warmer ocean water is spawning more large hurricanes leading some communities to finally begin to question whether it’s appropriate to rebuild in areas of repeated damage.

We don’t have many hurricanes in Santa Cruz, but we do have wildland fires. And while many of us tend to have short disaster memories, anyone living in Santa Cruz County three years ago will recall the CZU Lightning Complex fires that burned for 38 days in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Those fires destroyed 1,490 buildings, charred 86,509 acres, and came so close to the city that the University was evacuated out of caution. Many of you probably have friends or family who sadly lost their homes.

The climate crisis is also becoming a financial crisis. Historically those who suffered damage or destruction of homes from fires or hurricanes could count on some compensation from their homeowner’s insurance policies; but times have changed. The insurance industry, which is in business to make a profit, is increasingly wary of the risks from a warming climate and natural disasters and has made major policy changes in disaster vulnerable states. There is a growing nationwide trend of insurance companies substantially raising rates to cover actual risks, limiting coverage or declining new policies altogether.

State Farm, California’s largest homeowners’ insurance company, announced in June that they would stop “accepting new applications including all business and personal lines of property and casualty insurance, effective May 27, 2023”, everywhere in the state. The decision was “due to historic increases in construction costs outpacing inflation, rapidly growing catastrophe exposure, and a challenging reinsurance market”. This decision by State Farm followed a similar announcement by Allstate in November of 2022 that it would stop writing new policies for homeowners’ insurance in California.

Farmers Insurance also announced in June that due to rising catastrophe costs that they would no longer write new property insurance policies in Florida. Since 2018, the last time a named hurricane hit Florida until Idalia on August 30, seven property insurers have gone bankrupt and more than a dozen others have either pulled out of Florida entirely or increased rates significantly. If you can’t get insurance, you can’t get a mortgage, which will affect anyone trying to buy a home.

The climate crisis is real, it’s now, it’s everywhere and unfortunately, it’s not going away any time soon. In late-August, 45% of Americans, 150 million people, were under heat alerts with July recording the Earth’s hottest month on record, ever. A survey conducted in mid- to late July by the Washington Post-University of Maryland reported that a large majority of U.S. adults – 74% - say they’ve experienced extremely hot days over the past five years. Just over half of the random sample of 1,404 adults - 54% - say where they live is affected by climate change. But when asked if they think climate change is a major factor in these extremely hot days, just 35% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say it is, compared with 85% of those who lean Democratic.

93% of Democrats agree with the scientific consensus that human activity is causing changes to the world’s climate, compared with 55% of Republicans. According to the poll, 6 in 10 Republicans say the media generally exaggerates the seriousness of global warming and climate change.

In the Texas legislature this year proposals to improve energy efficiency failed. Bills that sought to limit greenhouse gas emissions were ignored. At the same time, legislation that was approved tries to block cities from taking action on climate change, eliminates tax incentives for renewable energy, and supports building more fossil-fuel-fired power plants.

On July 26, former vice president Mike Pence, who is running for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, unveiled his economic proposal. It calls for eliminating the Environmental Protection Agency and the present administration’s incentives designed to address climate change. He is in line with Republican lawmakers. At least four of the bills released so far by the House Appropriations Committee for 2024 include cutting funding to address climate change that Congress appropriated in the Inflation Reduction Act.

Sadly, climate has become a culture war issue, and at the worst possible time. There is no planet B to move to, and there is no off switch to reverse climate change and quickly turn the heat down. What are these politicians going to say to their children and grandchildren when the younger generation realizes the world they have been left with?