

**Climate change is already making us sick** – *Published in the San Jose Mercury News – Oct. 6, 2009*

By Karen Holl

As Congress debates health care reform, we risk missing a critical opportunity to combat one of the greatest threats to human health--climate change.

The urgency is driven by evidence that the effects of climate change are having very real, very immediate impacts on human health: The World Health Organization estimates that at least 150,000 people have died annually of causes related to climate change since 1970. Heat-related illness and mortality are increasing: More than 35,000 Europeans died in 2003 when a heat wave swept the continent. Increased temperatures exacerbate levels of lung-damaging chemicals and cause more respiratory allergies: The number of 'bad air' days will likely double in many U.S. cities by 2050.

Today, children, minorities, and the elderly feel the effects of climate change disproportionately, but people in large swaths of the U.S. will be at risk of malaria and dengue fever as formerly tropical diseases find favorable conditions in North America.

As temperatures rise, global warming is causing more extreme weather events that threaten lives, such as flooding, drought, and fire. Weather fluctuations even jeopardize our basic capacity to feed ourselves: Runoff from the Sierra snowpack that drives California's agriculture is projected to decline by 25 to 40 percent by 2050.

Critics of climate change legislation argue it will cost the public too much, when in fact slowing the pace of global warming will save us money: less money spent on energy, less money spent treating refugees displaced by floods and rising sea levels, and less money spent on health care. The increase in heat- and air-quality-related health care costs in California alone could total as much as \$24 billion annually by 2100, according to a 2008 report by two UC Berkeley economists.

Everyone agrees that preventive medicine is more cost-effective than emergency-room visits. That lesson applies to climate-change policy, as well. Investing in preventive climate medicine now will generate large savings--in human health, as well as the bottom line.

So, why is passing legislation to slow global warming so critical now? Doesn't Congress have enough on its plate? First, because the House of Representatives passed legislation in July, so we're halfway there. In the Senate, Barbara Boxer and John Kerry finally introduced a Senate bill last week. But some people are saying that, with health care on the agenda, the bill won't make it to the Senate floor until 2010.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, passing a climate change bill in the Senate could help the health care bill rather than hinder it. The conventional wisdom has been that the president has enough political capital to tackle only one big issue at a time. But political capital is a renewable resource that grows out of political success. If the Senate could pass climate change legislation

this fall, Obama would suddenly have a huge political win that would enhance his credibility on health care.

There is another important reason the Senate must move forward this fall and not let this bill stall out in committee. If the legislation is delayed, it will threaten two years of international climate negotiations that are scheduled to conclude this December in Copenhagen. If the U.S., as a leading producer of greenhouse gases, does not commit to reducing its emissions, it is unlikely that the rest of the world will follow.

Candidate Obama's promised that the U.S. would take a leadership role in fighting climate change, and the recent proposed EPA rules for limiting emissions from power plants and large industrial sources are a step in the right direction. However, health care reform has drowned out all other conversations in Washington. That's a shame, because our health itself is at risk without bold legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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