

Special Feature

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse

Sheldon Whitehouse is the junior United States Senator from Rhode Island. A Democrat, Sen. Whitehouse was elected in 2007, after having served as the Attorney General of Rhode Island between 1999 and 2003. He takes an active interest in environmental issues, advocating the need to find solutions to climate change. As of March 2018, Sen. Whitehouse gave over 200 speeches on the topic, urging his colleagues to take concrete action.

Every week that Congress is in session, I head to the Senate floor to urge my colleagues to take action on preventing climate change. In more than 225 of these speeches delivered since 2012, I have emphasized the mounting scientific evidence that our carbon pollution is driving dangerous changes in the atmosphere and oceans. I have also called out the powerful fossil fuel industry, which the International Monetary Fund reports enjoys a nearly \$700 billion annual subsidy just in the United States. That immense conflict of interest—protecting that subsidy—is the reason the industry has marshalled its massive resources to promote climate change denial and prevent Congress from doing anything to reduce our dependence on dirty energy.

Under President Donald Trump, former industry operatives fill executive branch posts, working to roll back climate protections. When the administration released its legally mandated National Climate Assessment in November, officials timed it for Black Friday during the Thanksgiving holiday, when it would be unlikely to get public attention. The report, written by 13 federal agencies, described the monumental damage the United States faces from climate change. It contradicted nearly every assertion Trump and his fossil-fuel-flunky Cabinet have made about climate change.

Tellingly, the administration tried to bury the report, rather than contest it. That may be because the science of climate change is incontrovertible. (Back in 2009, even Donald Trump said it was “irrefutable.”) Damage from climate change is already occurring. There is no credible natural explanation Human activity is the dominant cause.

Future damage from further warming will be worse than we previously thought. Economies will suffer. And as the report declares, we are almost out of

time to prevent the worst consequences of climate change.

The effects of climate change are felt in every corner of the nation. From the Ocean State, we're already seeing sea levels rise, as oceans warm and land ice melts. If fossil fuel emissions are not constrained, the National Climate Assessment says, "many coastal communities will be transformed by the latter part of this century." Along coasts, fisheries, tourism, human health, even public safety are under threat from increasingly extreme weather events and rising seas.

Out West, "more frequent and larger wildfires, combined with increasing development at the wildland-urban interface portend increasing risks to property and human life." We need to look no further than the massive wildfires Californians battled last year for stark evidence.

More than 100 million people in the U.S. live with poor air quality, and climate change will "worsen existing air pollution levels." Increased wildfire smoke heightens respiratory and cardiovascular problems. With higher temperatures, asthma and hay fever rise.

Groundwater supplies have declined over the last century, and the decrease is accelerating. "Significant changes in water quantity and quality are evident across the country," the report finds.

The government assessment finds that Midwest farmers take a big hit: warmer, wetter, and more humid conditions from climate change; greater incidence of crop disease, and more pests; worsened conditions for stored grain. During the growing season, the Midwest will see temperatures climb more than in any other region of the U.S.

Climate change will "disrupt many areas of life," the report concludes, hurting the U.S. economy, affecting trade, and exacerbating overseas conflicts for our military. Costs will be high: "With continued growth in emissions at historic rates, annual losses in some economic sectors are projected to reach hundreds of billions of dollars by the end of the century—more than the current gross domestic product of many U.S. states."

Danger warnings already flash in some economic sectors. The huge federal home loan corporation Freddie Mac has warned of a coastal property value crash, suggesting economic losses from climate change are likely to exceed those of the housing crisis and Great Recession. The Bank of England, as a financial regulator, is warning of a "carbon asset bubble."

The solution to climate change is to decarbonize, invest more in renewables, and broaden our national energy portfolio. A carbon price would allow this big shift to happen, all while generating revenues that could be cycled back to citizens, and help the hardest-hit areas of transition.

The smart move we need to make does not have to be painful. It can actually be a big economic win. Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz has testified:

“Retrofitting the global economy for climate change would help to restore aggregate demand and growth. Climate policies, if well designed and implemented, are consistent with growth, development, and poverty reduction. The transition to a low-carbon economy is potentially a powerful, attractive, and sustainable growth story, marked by higher resilience, more innovation, more livable cities, robust agriculture, and stronger ecosystems.”

Or we could do it the hard way, continuing to do the fossil fuel industry’s bidding and racking up the dire economic consequences of flooding, drought, wildfires, and stronger storms. The status quo is not safe.

Which way we now go depends on whether Congress can put the interests of our people ahead of the interests of the polluters. The record is not good, I’m afraid. Since the Supreme Court’s disastrous Citizens United decision, which unleashed unlimited corporate money into our elections, the politics of climate change is a tale of industry capture and control. So far, despite the industry’s massive conflict of interest and provable pattern of deception, and despite clear warnings from scientists and economists, the Republican Party has proven itself incapable of telling the fossil fuel industry “no.”

So it doesn’t look good. But the climate report does say we still have time—if we act fast.

There is one major development gives me great hope for the future. Survey after survey shows that the generation coming of political age today overwhelmingly supports taking action on climate change. They have longer to live on this planet than members of my generation, and they are determined to make it a better place. I expect they will.

I’ll close with a reference to *The Gathering Storm*, Winston Churchill’s legendary book about a previous failure to heed warnings. Churchill quoted a poem, of a train bound for destruction, rushing through the night, the engineer asleep at the controls as disaster looms:

“Who is in charge of the clattering train?
The axles creak, and the couplings strain.
. . . the pace is hot, and the points are near,
[but] Sleep hath deadened the driver’s ear;
And signals flash through the night in vain.
Death is in charge of the clattering train!”

We are that sleeping driver; the signals of a changing climate flash at us, so far in vain. It’s time to wake up.