

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Climate Change, Impact Assessment, and Sustainability

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In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations provided detailed scientific verification of concerns about global climate change. The IPCC report and other political events prompted *Science* magazine to declare in 2007 that the debate over whether climate change was real was over (Kennedy, 2007). Although this may have been a little premature from a public awareness and political standpoint, the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP) has tracked developments closely. In fact, in this journal and throughout most NAEP conferences for the last five years, climate change has been a topic, with climate change symposiums and related sessions providing highlights and a major reason to attend, enabling NAEP members an opportunity to receive critical updates once per year on the current trends and developments in environmental practice as it relates to this issue.

In 2014, the components of the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC will be published. The scientific confidence in climate change continues to increase, and the impacts continue to be narrowed down. The IPCC lists its findings with degrees of certainty, providing a qualitative or quantitative likelihood of confidence. The findings continue to be that “warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia.” Further, says IPCC, “it is extremely likely that human influence has

been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.” The words “extremely likely” are defined to mean 95%–100% certainty (IPCC, 2013).

Despite all that is being written in the scientific community, efforts to address the unfolding crisis are failing miserably. One thing that will have to happen to prod government action is for businesses to get behind the need to take action. For this to happen, businesses need to recognize that their interests and livelihood are being affected and that their customers support corrective action. For example, the tourism and travel industries need to connect the dots. So far, the only segment of the tourism industry that has seemed interested is the ecotourism groups, which are a small but growing part of the industry. To gain traction, the issue needs to attract the attention of the winter sports and beach tourism industries, as well. Of course, many more businesses and industries should be concerned, but the issue seems too long term and uncertain to sustain their interest.

Also needed is better analysis by the environmental practitioner community. Many of us are consumed by obtaining permits for smaller projects that have few measurable impacts on global climate change. It is difficult to account for and address global climate change at the project level. This is not unique to the study of climate change, and this type of problem has plagued environmental analysis from its beginnings. In cumulative effects analysis, it is hard to learn enough about trends in the broader landscape to fully assess the effects and determine appropriate measures for a small project, despite our best efforts. We have tended to defer these global and/or landscape issues to strategic or programmatic impact assessment.

Perhaps newer efforts to measure sustainability will help. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 1970) was the original sustainability statute. Section 101 covers sustainable development, but in 1960s language. Perhaps sustainability assessment can lead the way to better impact assessment and permitting by developing new approaches.

NAEP has increasingly been involved in NEPA modernization efforts. NAEP is working with the Council on Environmental Quality on a best-practices document for environmental assessments. Currently, the environmental policy committee is considering including sustainability measures in NEPA reviews. This could occur at several levels, up to and including a sustainability rating system (Carlson, 2013).

If sustainability assessment can be routinely included in NEPA projects, environmental impact assessment will gain new energy and meaning. NEPA, as the original sustainability statute, will be implemented. The promise of section 101, written in the 1960s, will finally be fulfilled.

References

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- Carlson, K. 2013. SEED: Sustainable Environmental and Economic Development—A Call to Incorporate Verifiable Sustainability Ratings into NEPA Reviews. *Environmental Law Review* 43(1):145–172.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2013, June 7. *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis*. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland. Available at <http://www.ipcc.ch>.