

## Climate change demands our best instincts

It was inspiring, and illuminating, to see on image on TV of people rushing toward the explosion at the Boston Marathon to help the injured. These brave souls instinctively abandoning concern for themselves to assist others. As clear as can be, they demonstrated that altruism is natural to most humans. This awareness illustrates what will be needed to successfully address today's most pressing challenge.

We are in the midst of the most important race humanity has ever run. The contest is between the rapidly accelerating human-caused breakdown of the Earth's climate and ecological systems, and the speed at which our admission of the problem and meaningful responses to it grow.

If we are to avoid calamity, the number of people who think like the rescuers at the Boston Marathon and unselfishly act for the benefit of others, now and in the future, by protecting the climate must quickly expand. A primary obstacle to success is the worldview that shapes the thinking of many elected officials and others, which is that self-focused material acquisition is the primary driver, and top priority, of human beings.

Climate scientists use the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as the indicator of future global mean temperature. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography recently reported that for the first time in at least 2.5 million years the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> will top 400 parts per million. This is 43 percent higher than the relatively stable levels of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> that existed prior to the industrial revolution and allowed civilization to develop.

There is no meaningful difference between 399 ppm and 400 ppm. But it is very important symbolically because it shows that humanity as a whole, and our nation in particular, is sleep walking into calamity.

Without a rapid wartime-like mobilization that engages every household, business, city, state, and public agency nationwide in slashing emissions and restoring ecosystems that sequester carbon dioxide, uncontrollable and catastrophic climate disruption is now certain.

This prospect is distressing. It is even more heartbreaking because we have the know-how, skills, and tools to reduce global warming to manageable levels. Many of the actions would generate significant personal, social, and economic benefits.

Yet, after spending time in Washington, D.C., and observing Congress and the Obama administration, it's clear that neither grasps the urgency of the situation. Democrats and Republicans alike can't see the problem or its solutions. The primary reason is that most members of both parties believe that near-term material self-interest trumps all else.

In his Inaugural and State of the Union addresses, for example, President Obama made bold commitments to address climate disruption. But he has done little to back that up. Instead, he proclaimed that he would do nothing on climate that affects middle-class jobs. He also promotes an "all-of-the-above" energy policy that counters the expansion and climate benefits of wind, solar and other forms of renewable energy by simultaneously increasing the production of fossil fuels and their associated greenhouse gasses.

Many other Democratic officials display similar ideological blindness. While some voice concern about climate disruption, and almost all blame Republicans for lack of action, most Democrats strive to grow the economy through increased energy and material consumption with little concern for the climate.

A case in point is the proposal by Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber and members of the Oregon Democratic

congressional delegation to create jobs by increasing timber harvest on BLM lands. Scientists at Oregon State University have found that these forests sequester huge amounts of carbon. To protect the climate they should not be cut.

This proposal, and many others like it by Democrats, gives the appearance of creating economic well-being when in reality they make us and all future generations poorer.

Most Republicans hold comparable views. Although many will privately admit that climate disruption is a real and troubling problem, none will say so publicly. Instead, most work to eliminate policy obstacles so that individuals and corporations can do whatever they want to advance their material self-interest with little regard for the Earth's climate or ecological systems.

Although the least cost option should always be pursued, the reality is that it does not matter what it costs, humanity must do whatever is needed to prevent climate disruption from spinning out of control. Our top elected officials, however, remain blinded by outdated world views and are failing us and all future generations.

A massive upwelling of selfless concern for other people, now and in the future, and the Earth's climate that sustains them is needed to overcome the self-focused materialistic perspective that blocks efforts to protect the climate. The unselfish acts by the rescuers at the Boston Marathon remind us that altruistic behavior is natural and can help us win the day.

Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group, which is affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Communities at Willamette University, where he is also a senior fellow.