

# The Register-Guard

## What The Pandemic Can Tell Us About Climate Disruption

---

By Bob Doppelt

Mar 26, 2020

As we deal with the stress and disorientation caused by the coronavirus, we should also ponder the many lessons the pandemic, and our response to it, can offer about the climate emergency.

First, the spread of the virus from China to over 100 countries shows we are all interconnected. Something happening in a town in one continent can soon affect people worldwide. Similarly, things we do here in Lane County and the U.S., including burning fossil fuels, clearing forests and degrading soils, undermines the safety and health of everyone worldwide by adding to global climate disruption.

Like the coronavirus, the pollutants that are disrupting the earth's climate are invisible, and no one is immune to the impacts. The worst-case U.S. scenarios predicted that if no action was taken, the virus outbreak could last a year and cause up to 1.7 million deaths. If we fail to quickly slash emissions and restore ecosystems, the impacts of climate disruption will be far worse, continue for decades or more and kill millions upon millions of people worldwide.

Another lesson learned from the pandemic is that we can muster the courage to put public health and safety above profit and comfort and do things that previously seemed unimaginable. To slow the spread of the virus, in just a few weeks we almost completely altered our lifestyles by constraining travel, closing businesses and implementing other formerly unthinkable socially and economically impactful actions.

This demonstrates that, to prevent civilization-shattering climate disruption, we can put health and safety over money, power and convenience and do what previously seemed impossible. As with the virus, we cannot solve the problem through incremental improvements. Big changes must be mandated.

Lane County, Eugene and other local communities, for example, can begin by issuing a state of emergency and banning the use of gas-powered vehicles certain days of the week. They can then require that, within five years, all residential and commercial facilities, and all vehicles, use zero fossil fuels and generate zero emissions. Simultaneously, clean renewable energy, electrified public transportation, electric vehicles, biking and walking options should be scaled-up to meet demand. The sale and use of 100% reusable and recyclable non-toxic goods and services should be mandated, and monoculture and pesticide-based industrial logging and agriculture prohibited. Similar requirements should be implemented nationally.

Just as the entire economy was quickly converted to war-time production when World War II started, we must swiftly convert the economy now to a zero fossil fuel and zero emission ecologically restorative system. As in WWII, the changeover will stimulate economy-wide innovations that create millions of meaningful new rural and urban jobs.

The urgent need for these changes highlights another important lesson learned from the pandemic: our government must be well-staffed and ready for the unexpected. Emergencies always create chaos. But due to cuts in federal public health and pandemic response programs, the U.S. was woefully unprepared for the pandemic. Many state and local public health programs are also underfunded and understaffed.

Top-quality public health, science, disaster response, regulatory and other programs are vital to address the climate emergency. We must immediately set aside ideology and partisanship and strengthen all levels of governments to provide these services.

Perhaps the most uplifting lesson learned so far from the pandemic is that when something threatens everyone on earth, people worldwide can be mobilized to act. Let's remember this and, after the virus is contained, initiate the all-hands-on-deck unifying global mobilization needed to control the climate emergency.

*Bob Doppelt writes a monthly column for The Register Guard on climate change-related issues.*