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Heat of the Moment



In mid-January, we learned that 2014 was the hottest on Earth since record-keeping began in 1880. Records were set across large swaths of every inhabited continent, and the ocean surface was exceptionally warm virtually everywhere except near Antarctica. The most unusual thing about this, according to scientists, is that there was not a strong El Niño, the large-scale weather pattern in which the Pacific Ocean charges the atmosphere with an enormous amount of heat.

Climate change skeptics have argued that global warming ended around 1998, when an abnormally robust El Niño produced the hottest year of the 20th century. The temperatures of 1998, however, are now being surpassed every four or five years—in fact, the 10 warmest years on record have all occurred since 1997—and 2014 was the first time that happened without a powerful El Niño. Of course, 2014 is only one year and global temperature is just one indicator, but this remains a significant part of the larger picture of global change and more extreme weather patterns and temperatures everywhere.

World leaders are standing behind this science more than ever. President Barack Obama, in his January State of the Union Address, said, citing issues like national security as well as threats to the natural environment and human health, “And no challenge—no challenge—poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.” Obama called attention to a recent announcement that the U.S. will double the pace at which it cuts carbon pollution, and China committed, for the

first time, to limiting its emissions—meaningful actions from the world’s two largest economies.

It remains to be seen whether this agreement will have a real impact on emissions numbers. I recently saw Glen Murray, the Canadian Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, speak at the World Water-Tech North America Summit in Toronto, and he in no uncertain terms stated what he thinks about the lack of measurable progress on emissions and other climate change initiatives, using phrases like “suicidal behavior” and “policy insanity.” He called out several U.S. politicians for blocking efforts to mitigate climate change and said that if they do not reverse their political actions, they will go down in history as the men and women who helped destroy the planet—not a legacy anyone would want.

Murray was not all gloom and doom, though; he said that innovative thinking and research and development can get us out of this mess, and if we retool the basics of our economy and technologies, we can find ways to run businesses and governments in sustainable ways—a mentality that is already alive and well in the storm water and erosion control industry.

It is getting harder to pretend that the Earth is not heating up, try as some might, and we need to think seriously about the long-term risks of doing nothing to slow down or reverse the course we are on. Something Obama got wrong: It’s not just about the future generations. It’s also about what’s happening to us right now. **SWS**

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