

Climate Change

Approved by the Northern Alaska Environmental Center
Board of Directors March 30, 2016
[Amended December 14, 2016]

Background

Climate change driven primarily by human activity is causing dramatic impacts in Alaska and around the world. The burning of fossil fuels, clearing of forests, and other human activities have resulted in warming temperatures on land and in the oceans, affecting precipitation patterns and contributing to coastal erosion, flooding, intense droughts, and changes in the distribution and abundance of plant and animal species. Climate change represents a deep philosophical loss of the concept of nature as something beyond human reach, and it devalues the traditional ecological knowledge Alaska Natives and other indigenous people have relied on for thousands of years. Developed nations' disproportionate contribution to the problem and developing nations' disproportionate share of the impacts represent an injustice to developing economies.

Climate change is a global problem with consequences for public health, economic stability, and security. Once billed as an environmental issue, it is now increasingly clear that climate change will directly and indirectly affect not only wild ecosystems, but also the clean air and water we rely on as humans, as well as our built environment. In Alaska, climate change has already led to significant reductions in sea ice, increased wildfires, thawing ground, and stresses on wildlife. Globally, it is already increasing the severity of storms and threatening to inundate coastal cities. While forecasts are inevitably inexact, scientific models project, in a relatively near future, a world radically different from the one we've known in modern history, and quite possibly unlike anything since the beginning of human history. Possible threats include food and water scarcity, mass migrations of people, and wars fought over shirking natural resources, all of which could destabilize global security. It would be hard to overestimate the threats climate change poses, especially when combined with the related stresses of ocean acidification, population growth, and other anthropogenic impacts.



Many effects of climate change are already occurring, including changes in weather and sea ice, and more changes are inevitable due to the nature of the carbon cycle and feedback mechanisms. Stopping climate change is no longer a reasonable goal; our actions going forward will determine the scope and severity of impacts. A response on the scale needed will require a radical shift in how we use and produce energy, how we produce food, and how we live. It is likely that the lifestyle Americans have enjoyed for the last several decades is not sustainable no matter the advances in technology achieved. Our collective will to change is the challenge of our time, and will affect generations to come.

While climate change is a global problem beyond any group or nation's ability to address alone, the collective action of communities and individuals is imperative. The Northern Center recognizes that we cannot appropriately protect Alaska without doing what we can to help slow climate change. The Center also recognizes the necessity of partnerships and support for national and international action.

Position

The Northern Center supports meaningful action to limit the extent of anthropogenic warming and to support people and places affected by related changes.

The Northern Center supports courageous action on the individual, local, state, and national level to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while causing the least disruption to lifestyle and maximizing side benefits to public health and the economy. The Center recognizes the role of fossil fuel development in our state's economy, the high cost of energy and goods, and the strong dependence of Alaskans on natural systems. We support solutions that recognize and protect Alaska's lifestyles and values.

Mitigation

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions – through changes in energy extraction and use, land use, and agriculture – is imperative to limiting the harm caused by climate change. Individually, we all contribute to the problem and all share a responsibility to act with



a greater awareness of our impact. Collectively, we must act at a scale suited to the problem. The Northern Center supports smart energy policies that encourage efficiency, conservation, and renewables (see Northern Center position, *Energy Use*), as well as legislation specifically to address carbon pollution.

Personal and community action

We all have a responsibility to consider the impact of how we use energy and consume goods and services, and to minimize those impacts when possible. We have an obligation not to waste, and also to use resources modestly. Many of the most significant changes we will make in addressing climate change will result from the collective action of individuals, but not directly the result of government. The Northern Center encourages community dialogue and action, especially that which includes the full range of stakeholders and recognizes wide-ranging viewpoints.

Local action

The Northern Center supports actions by local governments to reduce emissions by taking advantage of state and federal incentives and private financing options. The Center encourages governments to seek opportunities to reduce energy use and emissions in public buildings, transportation, public services, and purchasing.

State action

The Center likewise supports state programs and policies that reduce emissions from space heating, transportation, and electricity production. The Northern Center encourages the state of Alaska to factor greenhouse gas emissions into decisions about potential developments, infrastructure, and its own operations. The Center supports a statewide, Alaska-specific building code with efficiency requirements for residential and commercial buildings, as well as financial and administrative support to homeowners, businesses, and communities pursuing energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. The Center supports any other reasonable policy to reduce emissions, including a unified Railbelt electric utility, net metering, and renewable energy standards.

National and international action



Any national or international effort to reduce emissions must be effective, equitable, and transparent. Specifically, the Northern Center supports fuel efficiency standards and other reasonable regulatory limits on greenhouse pollution as well as national carbon pricing legislation, including revenue neutral fee and dividend. The Center supports ambitious and legally binding international agreements to reduce emissions and spur the transition away from fossil fuels.

Adaptation

For changes already underway or inevitable, governments and natural resource managers must consider the need for adaptation and provide the necessary support. Changing patterns in temperature and precipitation, thawing permafrost, and reduced sea ice are already affecting Alaska communities and plant and animal species across Alaska. Even lands set aside as wild will not remain free of human influence, as climatic changes alter natural ecosystems.

People and infrastructure

The Northern Center believes governments have a duty to help those disproportionately impacted by climate-related changes beyond their control, including those whose homes and villages are threatened by increased coastal erosion and those whose traditional subsistence practices are negatively affected. In addition to financial support, local and state government agencies should provide education and other resources to help Alaskans understand and adapt to changes, while integrating local knowledge into adaptation measures.

Local and state agencies must also be proactive in recognizing and addressing current and future changes when considering infrastructure projects, including the effects of altered weather patterns, thawing ground, and changes in seasonal access. Agencies responsible for permitting resource development projects must include climate change in consideration of cumulative impacts.

Natural systems

Managers of public lands and of fish and wildlife must take into account the direct and indirect effects of a changing climate on species distribution and abundance and any



other threats associated with warming, such as warm-weather diseases and parasites. Managers must also pay special attention to opportunities allowed to invasive species because of warming and identify ways to mitigate their spread.

Wild lands

Managers of wild lands must consider the stresses on natural systems by a changing climate and give additional protection when necessary to geographic areas or species at risk. That said, the Northern Center supports a hands-off approach that allows natural processes to continue to the greatest extent possible in Wilderness designated areas. The Center supports climate-related research in Wilderness areas as long as the research complies with the language and intent of the Wilderness Act and other applicable laws.

Other actions

The Northern Center supports other measures that increase public awareness of climate change and engage Alaskans in developing responses or provide meaningful opportunities for action.

The Center supports the reinstatement and continued work of an Alaska climate change working group at the executive level with committees focused on mitigation, adaptation, and immediate needs.

The Northern Center opposes energy projects or other developments that are irresponsible in light of the need to dramatically reduce our use of fossil fuels. On a global scale, limiting the worst effects of climate change requires that most of the world's known fossil fuel reserves remain in the ground. The Northern Center opposes all new oil and gas leasing on federal lands and waters. State and local governments, utilities, and others should not invest in long-term fossil fuel projects that lock in the production, sale, and consumption of fossil fuels, especially those with high carbon emissions.



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The Northern Center supports personal and institutional divestment from fossil fuel companies as a statement to policy makers and a necessary step in the transition away from carbon-based fuels.

The Northern Center recognizes the role of affordable energy in boosting our standard of living and Alaska's current financial and economic dependence on the oil industry. We encourage reflection and frank discussion of the technological and lifestyle changes needed for Alaska and the world as a whole and support efforts to find solutions.

Ultimately we believe many parts of the American lifestyle, including a dependence on personal vehicles, a preference for large houses, and a desire for consumer goods, are not sustainable in light of climate change [see Northern Center position, *Sustainability and Stewardship as Guiding Concepts*].

