

IDEAS & VOICES

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ON YOUR MIND

Status of climate change hasn't changed

By **Bob Brecha**
Guest columnist

Every several years an international group of more than 1,000 volunteer scientists finishes up a new summary of knowledge about the earth's climate system. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change just released the Summary for Policymakers from its Fifth Assessment Report, and the headlines should generally be: There is No News.

Rumors that this assessment would represent a backdown by the IPCC on aspects of climate change are not the case. The slowdown in surface temperature rise observed over the past 15 years has received a great deal of attention recently, but the IPCC report addresses this issue, which is part of natural variations superimposed on the background of rising temperatures. Crucially, the excess trapped heat is in the earth system; sometimes it shows up more in surface temperatures, sometimes it descends deeper into oceans.

Although the full reports will be released over the next several months in three parts, initial reaction to the first summary report receives the most attention. That summary is painstakingly hammered out over days of marathon sessions, with every word agreed upon by governmental representatives of member nations.

The only possible result of such a process is to arrive at the lowest common denominator, the most conservative opinion, of the report's scientific content.

What do we learn from the new report? Essentially, that physics and chemistry are mature disciplines and that the climate system has been reasonably well understood for over a century.

Put another way, the report states with increased confidence that warming of the atmosphere and oceans is occurring; both land and sea ice are melting; sea-level rise is accelerating; ocean pH is sinking; atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are higher than at any time in the last 800,000 years; and carbon dioxide emission from human activity is the main driving force behind these changes.

There are uncertainties in the details of the magnitude of climatic changes and the scale of impacts, but that should not be surprising, given the complexity of the climate system. However, these uncertainties, inhering in all scientific work, do not take away from the fact that scientists have known for over a century that increasing levels of CO2 would warm the planet and, by extension, change our climate.

IPCC scientists examined more than 9,000 published studies from around the globe, including projections for future climate change that are based on well-known physical, chemical, biological and geological principles. Far less certain than the science is the human component.

Looking to the future requires construction of potential scenarios which depend on socioeconomic factors that then result in varying levels of greenhouse gas emissions. On-

ly one of the standard scenarios, which essentially represent our choices for the future, leads to minimization of climate change – and implicitly assumes we will undertake major changes to our energy system.

The question is whether we continue on a “business-as-usual” path of rapidly increasing fossil-fuel CO2 emissions, choosing a high-stakes gamble on our ability to adapt successfully to dramatic changes over the next century and more. Or do we make decisions today that will allow us to transition to a future of clean energy, sustainable development and a stable climate?

A report can only provide us with the best scientific knowledge; it cannot tell us how we should treat the earth and future generations. That decision is up to us.

Bob Brecha is a professor in the University of Dayton's physics department and renewable and clean energy program. He is also the co-director of the university's Sustainability, Energy and the Environment initiative.

TODAY'S MODERATOR

Want to be part of health care panel?



Michael Williams
Ideas & Voices editor

If you've been waiting three years for the Affordable Care Act – aka Obamacare – to go online, today's a big day for you. It's when the health insurance exchanges begin signing up customers. This newspaper has been doing its best to bring you all the information you need to sort through and make sense of the ACA. Of course, all of this is happening as some politicians – espe-

cially in the Republican-controlled House – continue their quest to block the Affordable Care Act because they believe it will hurt the economy. The Ideas & Voices team will continue to bring you various viewpoints and opinions as the program rolls out more fully.

To further that goal, we're seeking medical professionals who would like to join us for a future roundtable discussion about the ACA and what it means for our readers. Interested in participating? Interested readers who work in the medical profession – doctors, nurses, hospital employees – can message me at mwilliams@coxohio.com for more information.

SHARE YOUR IDEAS

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Balanced views

FROM THE LEFT IRAN

Negotiating table on Iran has tilted in favor of U.S.



Thomas Friedman
My Opinion

I had the chance this past week to take part in two press meetings with Iran's new president, Hasan Rouhani, and they left me with several distinct impressions.

1. He's not here by accident. That is, this Iranian charm offensive is not because Rouhani, unlike his predecessor, went to charm school. Powerful domestic pressures have driven him here.

2. We are finally going to see a serious, face-to-face negotiation between top Iranian and U.S. diplomats over Iran's nuclear program.

3. I have no clue and would not dare predict whether these negotiations will lead to a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis.

4. The fact that we're now going to see serious negotiations raises the stakes considerably. It means that if talks fail, President Obama will face a real choice between military action and permanent sanctions that could help turn Iran into a giant failed state.

5. Pray that option 2 succeeds.

Iranians have now had enough democracy to know they want more of it, and they've had enough Islamic ideology and sanctions to know they want less of them. No, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, did not allow Rouhani to win and start negotiations by accident. The power struggle in Iran is no longer just between the Revolutionary Guards and the more pragmatic clerics. The Iranian silent majority is now empowered, and Rouhani's charm of-

fensive was dictated as much by them as by the supreme leader. Rouhani is here because Iran's regime is both overextended and underintegrated.

Ten years ago, America was overextended in the Middle East – mirrored in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, Iran's regime is overextended, expending men and money every day to keep the Syrian regime alive, Hezbollah on its feet, and its Iranian allies fortified in Iraq and Afghanistan. But while the regime is overextended, it remains under age-30 – some 60 percent of the population – feel underintegrated with the rest of the world. They want to be able to study, work and travel in – and listen to music, read books and watch films from – the rest of the world. That means lifting sanctions.

The fact that Rouhani could not shake Obama's hand because he feared a photo-op would be used against him by hard-line Revolutionary Guards back home – before he had gains to show for it – tells us how hard it will be to reach the only kind of nuclear deal Obama can sign on to. That is

one that affirms Iran's right to produce fuel for civilian nuclear power, but with a nuclear enrichment infrastructure small enough, and international oversight and safeguards stringent enough, that a quick breakout to a bomb would be impossible.

Geopolitics is all about leverage: who's got it and who doesn't. Today, the negotiating table is tilted our way.

That is to Obama's credit. We should offer Iranians a deal that accedes to their desire for civilian nuclear power and thus affirms their scientific progress while insisting on a foolproof inspection regime. We can accept that deal, but can they? I don't know. But if we put it on the table and make it public, so the Iranian people also get a vote, you'll see real politics break out there, and it won't merely be about the quality of Iran's nuclear program but about quality of life.

Thomas Friedman writes for The New York Times.

FROM THE RIGHT AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

GOP better served by letting voters feel the pain



Kathleen Parker
My Opinion

An alternative to the government shutdown would be a delay of the individual mandate, the most painful part of Obamacare, which may seem like a Republican victory but upon closer inspection would be a win for Democrats.

Historians might view either of these possible outcomes as yet another “Putinesca” victory for the president. Saved by the enemy.

Just as Russian President Vladimir Putin emerged at the brink of the U.S. bombing Syria to orchestrate a solution, Republicans may have provided a rip cord for President Obama.

Postponement of the mandate was part of the GOP bargaining package on raising the debt ceiling. Delay it for a year, GOP leaders said, and they'll raise the debt limit to keep the government operating.

At least one Democrat, Joe Manchin, has conceded this would be a pretty good idea since the health care overhaul isn't ready. Many flaws have been fully vetted for months, though new ones continue to reveal themselves.

Latest to the fraying Affordable (now “Adorable”) Care Act is a technological glitch in online applications for small businesses. It isn't ready yet and will be delayed. What is ready, and adorable, is a sampler of new ads aimed at children who are still fretful about the new plan. Oh, wait, no. The ads, featuring baby ducks and kittens – purring and feeling ducky about Obamacare – are aimed at adults. They're certifiably cute, but one can't escape the thought that the federal government has skipped all pretense at treating Americans as adults.

Here's the problem for Republicans, but to what end? Until Republicans can seize the Senate in 2014 and the White House in 2016, at which point they can repeal it?

Skinnier chance, that. More likely, Republicans will be viewed by a greater majority as having no talent for leadership. And if the debt ceiling isn't raised and the U.S. defaults, blame will fall at the feet of the GOP. No surprise there.

Now consider the alternative: Suppose Republicans succeed in getting the individual mandate delayed for a year – right up to the 2014 midterm election. Is it right? Not necessarily. If voters don't have to experience the uncertainty and discomfort of being forced to buy insurance in a dysfunctional system – all the while noticing that millions are still without coverage – who benefits?

Surely not the Republicans, who, on the one hand, can be blamed for depriving insurance coverage to those poor sick kittens and ducklings. On the other, they accrue no benefit from having prevented the pain of implementing Obamacare.

Republicans lose either way, but they may lose biggest if they win.

Alternatives do not abound. Republicans have drawn their red line in the sand. Democrats have drawn theirs.

There is one alternative that is both perhaps best for the country and hardest for Obama. He could relent not to Republicans but to the greater good. He could delay full implementation past the 2014 elections, which would accomplish two things: One, he could iron out wrinkles that are now apparent. Two, Democrats would get to slide through another election cycle without the most painful part of Obamacare – the individual mandate.

Kathleen Parker writes for The Washington Post Writers Group. Email address: kparker@washpost.com.



Fresh ideas

From The New York Times: “Smartphones and tablets may not seem like the best technological innovation for people who cannot see. But advocates for the blind say the devices could be the biggest assistive aid to come along since Braille was invented in the 1820s. Counterintuitive? You bet. People with vision problems can use a smartphone's voice commands to read or write. They can determine denominations of money using a camera app, figure out where they are using GPS and compass applications, and take photos.”