

TUE 02/20/2007

Guest column - Climate change, part four

By Richard Dale
SONOMA INDEX-TRIBUNE

A fourth report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was just released. It created some journalistic fanfare and, importantly, a subtle shift in national political discourse.

The report ratcheted up the certainty of prior reports' conclusions about the overwhelming evidence that things are getting warmer and will continue to do so, saying with 90 to 99 percent certainty that it is due to human causes.

The panel's 600 scientists and an equal number of reviewers also narrowed their predictions of warming: a 3 to 7 degree Fahrenheit rise in average temperature and a 7- to 23-inch rise in sea level by the end of the century. These are such cautious predictions, given new data about the speed of polar warming and melting ice, that many scientists were extremely disturbed, and debate had to be forced to a close to get the report out.

The effect of this report and other recent factors, is that in the United States it is now, finally, politically acceptable to say that climate change is real. And as if arriving at this place, years after the rest of the civilized world, wasn't hard enough, now comes a more difficult challenge. We have to make drastic changes or we are, to be polite about it, monsters.

Children alive today will see such radical changes that it will be unthinkable that we didn't do anything sooner. The Iraq war, the Middle East, terrorism, China taking over as the dominant economic power, will no doubt seem small by comparison.

What are likely changes for Sonoma Valley?

* Sonoma Valley's world-class viticulture could shrink to negligible, as premium grapes are unable cope with increased stress from heat.

* Catastrophic fires, because of higher evapotranspiration, stress on vegetation, years of fire suppression, and buildings being allowed in highrisk, fire-prone areas, may become normal.

* Large areas in the south Valley may become so flood-prone that they will have to be abandoned. Over the next few hundred years, it is certain that these lands will be underwater.

* Floods like last winter's New Year's Eve storm may become so common that many homes along larger creeks will have to be abandoned.

* Drought and water scarce years may become common.

Less clear is what we will do about it. It is certain that we will do something, either with foresight and civility, or later out of desperation. Here are just a few ideas.

1. Bring farmers, producers, planners, and scientists together to plan how to preserve our wine industry, given the predicted shift in local climate.
 2. Halt building on ridges and dry hillsides, pay homeowners to move from critical fire areas, and begin a program of controlled burns to reduce fire risk.
 3. Expand the successful facilitated process that brings Valley interests together around groundwater, to include water supply and flooding. We must solve these linked issues at the same time, and solve them as a community.
 4. Do our part to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Plan development near transit; support live-work development; expand transit and introduce new options such as weekend jitneys for visitors; put fuel efficiency into practice at home and work; expand solar, wind and other renewable power in homes, neighborhoods, and businesses; buy local products and services, including food, water, and energy; urge legislators to support these practices.
- Change is a part of life - tormentor and muse. How we face change, especially change we can see coming, is one of the great measures of our lives as individuals and as a culture. Let's hope we use this confrontation with climate change to steer ourselves toward a Sonoma Valley where culture thrives and our successors are grateful to live.

- Richard Dale, Sonoma Ecology Center