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Climate Change and the Next Generation

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Patel: Climate change and the next generation

By Jugal Patel
Oct 5, 2014



My generation has always been told to think big. Extraordinarily advanced tools are at our disposal. Not only do we have centuries of knowledge from which to build, but we have unprecedented access to information and technology to supplement our endeavors.

That potential to affect the world coincides with the understanding that our world will affect us. We know that if we fail to adequately respond to our planet's changes, it may become impossible in our lifetime to innovate our way out of the problems we'll face.

With the guidance of the scientific community, policy experts have set a limit on how much greenhouse gas we can afford. Eighty percent of fossil fuels will have to remain in the ground for global warming to be limited to 2 degrees celsius.

On our current trajectory, we are headed well beyond that. The world emits far more greenhouse gases than the scientific community advises is safe for the climate. The fossil fuel industries are still buying our legislatures and propagating misinformation. And Virginia's largest electricity provider, Dominion Resources, is still at the bottom in rankings of clean-energy production among the nation's largest utilities.

At what point does disregard for the most informed warnings society can provide become irresponsibly gambling with our livelihood, with our future?

Any student in Norfolk can feel the effects of climate change. At Old Dominion University, intense flooding can make it difficult for commuters to get to campus. Residents who live on campus have to walk through water in some areas just to make it to class. It is already part of our lives, and it's going to get worse.

Business as usual has the potential to exponentially accelerate rising sea levels.

My generation will watch Norfolk's problems spread. It will become more difficult for us to navigate Hampton Roads. More days of stronger flooding will dampen our local economy. Most of all, I worry about the impact of extreme weather events such as super typhoon Haiyan and superstorm Sandy.

Those of us most affected by climate change's trajectory deserve a louder voice in the conversation, and ought to be central to solutions.

If we continue to pollute the Earth's atmosphere at our current rate, I, and billions of others, will be forced to endure the conditions predicted by the world's foremost scholars and experts, resting on years of scientific evidence and rigorous examination.

We can no longer wait on the transition to clean energy. But natural gas isn't the answer. Studies have linked natural gas extraction to groundwater contamination and seismic activity. Natural gas leaks also release methane into the atmosphere - a greenhouse gas that can be dozens of times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Gov. Terry McAuliffe considers expanding natural gas infrastructure an environmental endeavor. It's not. It's a pragmatic response at a time we can't afford to be.

History has shown that our brightest minds can take a seemingly impossible task and turn it into reality. Just as we focused our innovation into landing on the moon 45 years ago, we'll have to focus on advancing clean-energy technology.

The energy we need is all around us in the natural world - in the sun and wind and tides. But we'll need innovation to harvest it on a utility scale. This requires us to seriously invest in renewable technology.

The fact is that at some point in my generation's lifetime, we'll have no choice but to transition to a clean economy. The longer we wait, the more expensive it will be. But if we think big and respond quickly, an era of unlimited clean energy and a sustainable planet will truly be within our reach.

Jugal Patel is a student at Old Dominion University and representative to the Virginia Student Environmental Coalition.

