

Time to Adapt to the Climate Crisis

Weekend storm shows this work can't stay on back burner, says John Stone.

Ottawa Citizen
May 24th, 2020

Last week, the federal government launched a consultation process to help bring together a national climate adaptation strategy for Canada by November, in time for COP-27, the next global climate conference to be held in Egypt. Building resilience against climate disasters will be high on the agenda.



Ottawa and the surrounding area was hit with a destructive storm Saturday. Cleanup was well underway with hydro, community members and first responders on Sunday. Merivale Road near Viewmount Drive was closed with lines down on cars.

There is no longer any doubt that climate change is real. The weekend's devastating storm, which tore down trees and power lines all over Ottawa and wreaked havoc on much of Ontario, including deaths and serious injuries, was the most recent stark sign. Last year's catastrophic wild fires, heat waves and flooding in British Columbia also brought home the impacts of extreme weather events made more frequent and severe by climate change. Infrastructure, including transportation, water, sanitation and energy systems have been compromised by extreme and slow-onset events, with resulting economic losses, disruptions of services and impacts to well-being. According to the Vancouver Sun, dikes that were breached in Abbotsford, B.C., following a massive rainstorm, were predicted to fail years ago.

Governments around the world have to varying degrees vowed to take action to address the threat, primarily through commitments to reducing their emissions of greenhouse gases. However, past emissions have altered the composition of the atmosphere and left us with a legacy. Further impacts are inevitable. Adaptation through such policies as improving infrastructure standards becomes an imperative, particularly for the most vulnerable and often the poorest, who have contributed the least to the climate emergency. Regrettably, in Canada adaptation has been treated as something of a Cinderella in climate policy-making.

On Feb. 27, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its Sixth Assessment Report of the Working Group II on climate change impacts, vulnerability and adaptation. Its timing couldn't have been worse. In the middle of the night of Feb. 24, Russian troops invaded Ukraine. The IPCC's call for urgent action to address the ever-increasing threat of climate change was lost in the noise of war.

At the end of 2021, the IPCC had concluded in its Working Group I assessment on our most up-to-date scientific knowledge of climate change that "It is unequivocal that human influence has

warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land.” The WGII authors, building on this corpus of science, have brought together evidence that this warming has given rise to widespread and pervasive impacts on ecosystems, people, settlements and infrastructure. Climate change has reduced food and water security, hindering efforts to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The climate emergency has been caused by the burning of oil and gas, which have fuelled the insatiable economies of Western countries and in the process have contributed to building up the war chest of the Russian government and lined the pockets of Russian oligarchs. Far-reaching sanctions have been applied to the Russian oil and gas industry and Western governments face the challenge of finding replacement energy sources. We are in a time of converging crises.

To simply replace one source of fossil fuels by another would seem to make no sense at all. On the contrary, we should take advantage of this crisis to look for innovative technologies and policies. We are already seeing considerable advances in the development and installation of renewable energies that are now cost-competitive against conventional fossil fuels. We need to see similar drive to innovative adaptation technologies and policies.

This is where the most recent IPCC Assessment Report is useful. To an extent unparalleled in previous documents, it provides useful information on adaptation solutions — on what works and what doesn't. In addition, the report, by assessing the impacts of climate change on ecosystems, draws out the connections with another converging crisis, namely biodiversity. There is increasing evidence that degradation and destruction of ecosystems by humans increases the vulnerability of people, thus reducing food and water security and hindering efforts to meet development goals.

Canada should have had a climate adaptation plan in place many years ago, before the catastrophic Fort McMurray fire, and before the devastating fire, heat and flooding in B.C. last year. But it is not too late. We owe it to the present and future generations to build our resilience against inevitable bouts of extreme weather and its existential consequences for human civilization and life on this planet.

John Stone is a member of the Bureau of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He is a retired Canadian public servant, was on the Bureau of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for the third and fourth Assessment Reports, and previously served on the Board of the Pembina Institute.