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Guest opinion: Sensible response needed to climate change

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A Montanan usually takes a practical approach. We study a problem, figure out how to solve it, and then do it. That's how I was taught. My Montana roots go back to the 1870s, followed by a long line of tough, practical, conservative Montanans. As a geologist I followed the mold, working in mining and then in oil and gas for Chevron for most of my career, where conservative and practical are good qualities.

So with that background, I recently set out to separate facts from hype on climate change. I was frankly surprised at what I learned.

First, is the climate warming? Yes. Temperatures have increased steadily over the last few decades. That is not opinion. It's measured. It's real.

Why is the climate warming? Accumulated fossil fuel combustion accounts for more than enough carbon dioxide to cause the warming we see. That is also measured. That is also real.

We didn't know our hydrocarbon economy would cause climate change when we built it. But now we know it does.

High carbon levels

Hasn't carbon dioxide been this high in the past? In the geologic past, yes, but not in the human past. Current levels are significantly above anything seen in the last 800,000 years. Homo sapiens have been around for only about 250,000 years. And throughout the 5,000 years or so for development of society and cultures we have seen very little change in greenhouse gases or climate.

Further, relative to the changes we see in geology, the spike in carbon dioxide (and other greenhouse gases) is happening exceedingly quickly.

Does it really matter? Unfortunately it matters a lot. The levels of greenhouse gases we have already reached can cause major climate change, some we're seeing already. Because we have little information on such a quick, sharp increase of greenhouse gases, we don't know how to predict how much of a change we'll see, nor how quickly it will happen. But our predictions to date have been too conservative. Climate change is happening faster than we expected.

Can we turn it around? Yes. We need to phase out fossil fuel combustion, and we must act together. No state, no country, can turn it around alone. We need a global solution.