



Wednesday, May 24, 2006

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Global warming debates heat up again

By Lisa Chun
United Press International
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WASHINGTON -- As a new U.S. hurricane season looms, the threat posed by global warming has taken center-stage again in the Washington policymaking community.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton put it there in a powerful speech delivered in Austin, Texas Saturday when he said that global warming was now a greater threat to the world than terrorism and the United States and other nations had to "get off our butts" to deal with it.

Clinton, speaking to the graduating class at University of Texas' Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, said the United States needed to make "more partners and fewer enemies" in the world and establish international "institutionalized cooperation" before global warming caused "catastrophic damage" to human societies.

"Climate change is more remote than terror but a more profound threat to the future of the children and the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren I hope all of you have," the former president said. "It's the only thing we face today that has the power to remove the preconditions of civilized society," he said.

"I am not one of those who is pessimistic about the future of the world, assuming we get off our butts and do something about climate change in a timely fashion," he added.

The devastation of the 2005 hurricane season has made the link between global warming and hurricanes an even more pressing issue than before.

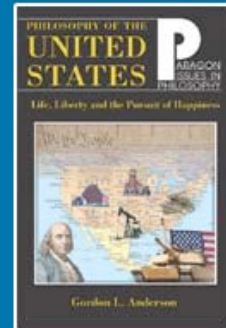
A conference held in Washington Monday by Clear the Air, an environmental education campaign, discussed the impact of global warming on recent hurricane trends. The conference panel agreed that there was a direct link between the rise in sea surface temperatures and the rise in the number and intensity of hurricanes, two issues that generated more concern in the wake of Hurricane Katrina last August.

While some scientists argue that the recent increase in the quantity and force of hurricanes is a part of a normal cycle, experts from the conference believe that current hurricane trends are anything but natural disasters.

Kerry Emanuel, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a panelist, disagreed with scientists who were skeptical that global warming directly affected hurricane activity. Emanuel said many of those scientists were concerned with short term studies such as predicting where storms will

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land, a job requiring the observation many other factors causing hurricanes.

However, Emanuel said studying hurricanes and global warming holistically revealed a clear relationship between global warming and hurricanes.

Emanuel cited a 20-year-old report that predicted that as ocean temperatures rose, hurricane intensity could be expected to increase as well. He also said that in the Atlantic Ocean, there was a correlation in the rise of sea surface temperatures and the number and intensity of hurricanes.

Emanuel said the ocean's rising sea surface temperature was not only the cause for 2005's catastrophic hurricane season but the low sea surface temperatures, caused by aerosol pollution, led to mild hurricane seasons from the 1950's through the 1980's.

Deputy Director of Clear the Air, Peter Altman, said, "The number of storms that reach category four and five -- the most powerful, damaging hurricanes -- has nearly doubled over the past 35 years."

Last year's particularly overwhelming and dangerous season broke many records for hurricane seasons. According to the magazine "Weatherwise," 2005 saw the most Category 5 hurricanes in a season; the deadly Katrina, Rita and Wilma. The onslaught from the trio of Category 5 hurricanes not only left many dead, injured and homeless but had a disastrous financial impact on the United States as well.

Evan Mills, another panelist and staff scientist at the U.S. Department of Energy, said severe economic implications of the 2005 hurricanes include higher insurance and oil prices. "We enter this season with severe handicaps," he said.

Mills said an increasing population along U.S. coastal regions in combination with the rising number of powerful hurricanes could only result in more hurricane disasters similar to those of 2005. "The trend [for hurricane damage] will be towards increasing losses," he said.

Angela Anderson, director of Clear the Air demanded a stronger U.S. government response to the past hurricane season with environmental legislation.

Anderson, also the conference moderator, said she advocated new congressional measures to curb global warming to prevent worse future hurricane seasons. "Congress has to set a national limit on how much global warming pollution can be put into the atmosphere," she said.



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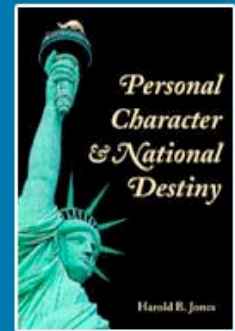
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