

## A 'code red' on climate change

Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN)

August 11, 2021 Wednesday

METRO EDITION

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. 6A

**Length:** 697 words

**Highlight:** New U.N. report shows many dire effects are locked in; avoiding catastrophe will take aggressive action.

### **Body**

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The fact that climate change is caused by humans is "unequivocal," according to a new United Nations report.

What's also unequivocal is that humans are not doing enough to stop or even slow the rate the climate is changing, and that an ongoing failure to do so could make this summer's natural disasters - fires and extreme heat in western states and Canadian provinces, Greece and Turkey as well as floods in Central Europe and China and drought in multiple parts of the world - happen far more frequently.

That bleak outlook comes from the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Its latest report is from 234 scientists, based on about 14,000 peer-reviewed studies. It found that greenhouse gas emissions already have warmed the planet 1.1 degrees Celsius (about 2 degrees Fahrenheit) since 1850, and that the 1.5 degree Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) that was the objective set at in the Paris climate accord is already baked in.

"Unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to close to 1.5 degrees Celsius or even 2 degrees Celsius will be beyond reach," the report states.

According to the IPCC, climate change already is intensifying the water cycle, with more intense rainfall and flooding in some areas and more devastating drought in others. Rainfall is likely to increase in higher latitudes and decrease over broad swaths of the subtropics. In addition, coastal areas will see enduring sea-level increases throughout this century. And extreme sea-level events that were once-in-a-century events would happen annually by 2100.

Additionally, permafrost thawing and the loss of seasonal snow cover - as well as the melting of ice sheets, glaciers and summer Arctic sea ice - will be amplified. And ocean changes, including warming, more frequent marine heat waves, acidification, and reduced oxygen levels will continue through at least the end of the century.

Many of these outcomes, especially heat, flooding and rising seas will hit particularly hard in cities, the IPCC said.

"We are absolutely having an influence on the climate and it's coming fast, and it's going to get substantially worse if we don't take drastic action in the near term," Jessica Hellmann, director of the University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment, told an editorial writer when asked about the U.N. report. The pattern, Hellmann added, "is one of increased uncertainty - and frankly, alarm."

That alacrity is warranted. Especially, as Hellmann states, "what we're experiencing this summer is the new normal; what we're trying to do is avoid worse than this."

The new normal is already straining the capacity of the country and especially the world. And that's not even considering an inevitable increase in refugees fleeing unlivable conditions or deadly conflicts that break out due to

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**climate change**. Refugee waves have often been met with a rise in authoritarianism, which could in turn exacerbate the existential threat democracy itself is facing in many nations.

Avoiding even more extreme impacts from **climate change** is still possible. But the world needs to move quickly and cohesively, something it has not been able to do so far.

The next major U.N. **climate-change** summit will be in November in Scotland, and nations need to not only be more specific and aggressive on how they will hit their Paris commitments, but how they will move toward a carbon-neutral profile by midcentury.

President Joe Biden has signaled that intent with several executive actions and by backing legislation to address **climate change**. Some of this has been met with predictable pushback by Republican lawmakers - a split reflected in several states, too, including Minnesota.

What's been proposed should be looked at as the minimum. Avoiding an actual catastrophe won't be easy, or inexpensive, or without public and personal sacrifice. But it must be done soon, since the window to avoid the worst is closing.

The report "tells us that delay is not a viable option," said Hellmann.

Indeed, it's time to get beyond delay - and certainly end denial - and move toward mitigating what the U.N. rightly called a "code red for humanity."

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** **CLIMATE CHANGE** (90%); CLIMATOLOGY (90%); DROUGHT (90%); ENVIRONMENTAL ACCIDENTS & DISASTERS (90%); NATURAL DISASTERS (90%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (90%); UNITED NATIONS (90%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (90%); EXTREME TEMPERATURES (89%); GLACIERS & ICEBERGS (89%); **CLIMATE CHANGE** REGULATION & POLICY (78%); EMISSIONS (78%); GLOBAL WARMING (78%); GREENHOUSE GASES (78%); HEAT WAVES (78%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (78%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (78%); RESEARCH REPORTS (78%); SEVERE WEATHER (78%); COASTAL AREAS (77%); NEGATIVE NEWS (77%); ENVIRONMENTAL TREATIES & AGREEMENTS (73%); SAFETY, ACCIDENTS & DISASTERS (73%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (57%); EDITORIAL (%); REPORT (%); ENVIRONMENT (%); WEATHER (%); POLLUTION (%); SCIENCE (%)

**Industry:** EMISSIONS (78%); GLOBAL WARMING (78%)

**Geographic:** MINNESOTA, USA (92%); ARCTIC OCEAN (79%); ARCTIC (79%); CHINA (79%); EUROPE (79%); TURKEY (79%); CANADA (77%); GREECE (57%)

**Load-Date:** August 12, 2021