

Our two worlds are colliding

The world we humans inherited and the world we've built cannot co-exist much longer, warns **LARRY J. SCHWEIGER**, former president of WWF and PennFuture

Global realities are profoundly disrupting old norms. There are now two distinct worlds. One is the natural world with its assemblage of plants, animals, soils, minerals, air and waters, and the other is the built world with all the corporate structures, institutions and infra-structures. Far too many of us now are living in the second world with little regard, connection or interest in the first.

It is hubris or profound ignorance to think we can live in the second world without regard for the first, yet that is where we are. A massive ecological debt is accumulating. Our neglect comes with a high price to all of nature, and it will be paid by our children and grandchildren with compounding penalties.

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and hundreds still missing in California, as well as untold property losses. California no longer has a fire season; it can burn year-round. It's a tinderbox with high winds; all it takes is a single spark.

California has been in a seven-year drought and is just coming off of the hottest summer on record. I was alarmed when I flew over a large swath of California in September and witnessed brown and severely dried out chaparral and forest landscapes for as far as I could see in all directions. The canyon fires in Malibu and Thousand Oaks, for example, were not forest fires but raging brush fires.

These fires have more to do with climate mismanagement than forest mismanagement. While fuel-culling needs to continue at the interface between the natural and human-made worlds, no amount of timber management can overcome the fact that Western landscapes are drying out and overheating. Last year, fires in Oregon and Washington claimed an area the size of Maryland. Climate models have long predicted that that the West will experience more heat, droughts, and therefore, more wildfires. A California climate-change assessment warned that California could see a 77 percent increase in the average area burned each year during this century. The frequency of mega-wildfires burning more than 25,000 acres is likely to increase by about 50 percent.

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This is just the beginning of our troubles. At the current pace of climate change, the U.S. could soon be experiencing floods, crop and fire losses exceeding \$1 trillion in a single year. The world's top climate scientists, organized through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, have warned that we are running out of time to bend the curve on greenhouse-gas emissions and avoid triggering the worst impacts of climate change when the world exceeds the 2-degree Celsius threshold.

By acting now, we can still avoid an unprecedented global disaster, but we need to mobilize in the way this nation responded to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. During World War II, my mother, Margaret Malseed, oversaw record keeping on federal contracts for American Bridge Company. One of a number of Western Pennsylvania companies that devoted its full capacity to national defense, American Bridge manufactured 199 LSTs (tank landing ships), four aviation repair vessels, major components for 11 Essex class aircraft carriers, 77 C-type cargo ships, four tankers, 20 cargo

lighters and 346 knock-down barges. American Bridge also built strategic portable bridges for the Allies' invasion of Europe.

Recognizing the full extent of the climate risks we face, we must adopt a similar war-like footing. We cannot stop climate change by burning different kinds of fossil fuels. We must build a clean-energy infrastructure that includes energy efficiencies, solar and wind power and many other market-ready innovations. I drive an electric car and power my home and car with wind and solar. As a society, we need to move fast on this front with aggressive policies and financial assistance for those who need it.

While too many lawmakers continue to deny climate change and refuse to act, there also is a pernicious idea in the political ether on both sides of the aisle that we can slow-walk our way to carbon reductions, that we can just move from coal to fracked natural gas. Millions will pay dearly for this failure of imagination.

Many youth are outraged by our inaction. In 2015, 21 young people filed a lawsuit, *Juliana v. U.S.*, in Oregon federal district court asserting that government inaction is allowing climate change to accelerate in violation of their constitutional rights to life, liberty and property, while also failing to protect public resources. U.S. District Court Judge Ann Alken, in a ruling on a motion to dismiss the case, wrote, "Exercising my 'reasoned judgment,' I have no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society."

The trial will not begin as originally scheduled because the Trump administration is using every legal tactic to stop the case from going forward. From the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to the Supreme Court, our government seeks to silence the youth and keep climate science out of the courtroom. In their latest attempt to throw sticks into the kids' bicycle spokes, the Trump administration went back to the Ninth Circuit for a stay. Meanwhile, Judge Alken indicated she would promptly issue a trial date once the circuit court lifts the stay. We must now either support the millennials or step aside so these young leaders can create new solutions to long-ignored threats. If left unpaid, our ecological debt will wipe out their rightful inheritance.

Larry Schweiger is the former president of National Wildlife Federation, PennFuture and Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and the author of "Last Chance: Preserving Life on Earth."

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