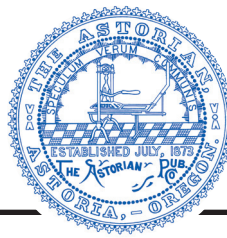


# OPINION



# the Astorian

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Founded in 1873

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## CLIMATE CHANGED

# Making climate change understandable

The brutal coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that we live in an interconnected world. When things go haywire in some small place, its repercussions can soon be felt on the other side of the globe.

So it is with our climate.

The dryland wheat fields of Umatilla County connect to the roiling sea at the Columbia Bar, Mount Bachelor's snowy slopes connect to the Painted Hills, the alpine meadows of the Willows connect to the Amazon rainforest and the Australian outback.

Climate is a worldwide phenomenon — too large to easily comprehend. Yet, it is as local as your backyard garden, as intimate as the air you breathe.

For decades, it has been difficult for media organizations to connect global climate implications to local lives. We're just not designed for it.

For plenty of good reasons, newspapers focus on what occurred today and what you need to know to get through tomorrow: how the Senate voted, how the judge ruled, who won the big game. The daily temperature increasing steadily, but at a relatively unnoticeable amount from day to day, rarely met the newsworthiness requirements to make the front page.

That means we've been ill-equipped to cover perhaps the biggest story currently pulsing through our planet: the consistent creep of a changing climate.

That change has massive implications for our daily lives. The world around us is increasingly hostile to human life — a petri dish capable of moving a deadly virus across the world in a few months, with unnatural forests sitting a lightning strike away from inferno, levees straining against 100-year floods each spring, air so foul it is taking years off our lives.

The systems of agriculture, infrastructure and technology that undergird civilization are at risk. And that's front page news.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Waves roll in along the beach at Fort Stevens State Park in Warrenton. Rising sea levels are among the concerns with climate change.

Yet, this change has manifested in dribs and drabs. For most people, it won't be noticeable — it won't be real — until they see it in their garden or feel it in their lungs.

EO Media Group, imperfect though it may be, is well organized to attempt to stitch the local impacts to you and your community into a wider story of the region and the world.

We have done it before, to acclaim. In 2007, our organization won the prestigious Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment. That project included traditional, local reporting on climate change by our newsrooms — from the sandy spit of Long Beach, Washington, to the dry pine forests of John Day. It offered views on the issue from diverse people in diverse locations. We shared the diverse demands those people made on their water, soil and air.

Placing disparate stories alongside one other in 2007 helped readers get a

sense of climate change in a new way. By watching people deal with different issues in different communities, readers were able to see the larger context of climate at play.

This year, we're embarking on a similar project. Climate issues have changed dramatically in the intervening 13 years, so we're looking back on what has changed, we're looking at the facts on the ground now and we're looking ahead to what is still to come.

It's not the most opportune time. COVID-19 has devastated the world economy and the local news ecosystem has been no exception. Many people are out of work, out of the office, out of daily routine.

But for a project like this, our current moment has its benefits. We can now clearly see the invisible threads that connect the world. If airplane traffic can clearly help spread a virus, we now understand that it can also spread pollution that affects Northwest communities — even if the flight was between Dubai and Tokyo. We now see clearly that it costs lives to ignore, downplay and be ill-prepared for a disaster that science tells us is approaching.

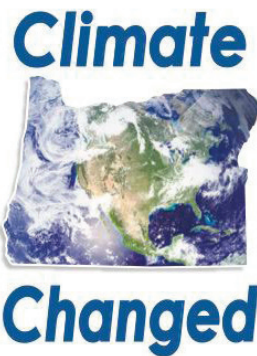
Despite the constraints in our world and in our newsrooms, we're moving forward with this important work. In The Astorian — and EO Media Group papers like it — you'll see stories written by your local reporters about climate issues in your community. And you'll see reporting from other locations — places you've visited, places where you have family, places you haven't heard of.

We have no desire to make this political. And, while our reporting will be backed by science, we're not going to inundate you with data.

We will cover climate change like we would cover every other local issue: We'll talk to your neighbors and representatives about what they are doing about it, we'll get advice from local experts, and we'll tease out the impacts on local industry and community life.

Our goal is to make climate change understandable and approachable. We want it to be an issue that you can get your head around and do something about.

*Tim Trainor is the former news editor of the East Oregonian. He is overseeing EO Media Group's Climate Changed series.*



## WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

# Climate series was landmark journalism

The most remarkable element about EO Media Group's climate series was the timing.

Planning began in April 2005.

That's 15 years ago.

This was way, way, before climate change was a fashionable topic. This was years before carbon offsets or cap and trade became loaded buzzwords in political and economic discourse. No one was running for president with climate as their single issue.

Heck, the delightfully blunt Swedish activist Greta Thunberg was just 2 years old.

And former Vice President Al Gore's influential movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," was still a year away.

Yet Steve Forrester, then editor and publisher of The Astorian, gathered his senior staff from around the company in a conference room and announced, "We are going to do a series on the most important issue facing the world."

Some newsroom leaders in that room, perhaps most, literally did not know what he would say next.

His exact words are not recorded, but the emphasis was clear. The Northwest's climate was changing. There is clear evidence. Because of this, our newsgathering forces are going to be harnessed and cover the issue.

Two agricultural economists were brought in to address an early planning session. Their expertise from Oregon State University and the University of California, Davis added significant validity to our direction.

### Extraordinary

It became clear early on there was a stumbling block. Human-caused global warming was not considered a fact. Instead, it was a political issue. Human impacts — basically rampant industrialism and polluting vehicle fumes — were in dispute, contested by advocates who chose

instead to point to evidence that climate patterns are cyclical.

For many of us, it is hard to imagine that all the cars clogging Portland or Seattle and the belching smokestacks of coal-powered industrial plants are not doing something detrimental to our environment, and the air we breathe.

But in this context, the chief executive officer for our company made an extraordinary statement. In my 40 years of journalism, I will admit that I found it the most arrogant-sounding statement ever made by a colleague in the zillions of hours I have spent in workplace meetings.

"Let's not focus on the naysayers," said former news executive John Perry. "It is clear our climate is changing. Let's report that." Basically, he was offering permission to ignore them.

Perry, now retired from our company, may not have realized it at the time, but his simple statement saved the entire reporting team hours and provided the focus we needed. Unlike the Woodward-Bernstein stories on Watergate in the Washington Post, Perry gave us permission not to add an obligatory "insert denial" before the fifth paragraph of every story.

This morphed into a policy: We would always always use the words "climate change" and never "global warming," unless it was in a direct quote from a scientist or other source. That may seem a cosmetic difference, then and now, but for us it was important.

Perry's statement was the second biggest reason the series was completed so smoothly. At conferences of journalists a couple of years later, I was asked how our company pulled it off. Most environmental journalists were still pressuring their editors to allow them to report on climate change, often with a considerable amount of pushback because it was unproven or just plain dull.

The single-most important was Forrester's zeal for the topic.

We were not going to fail.

### Important

The series roped in 22 writers, seven photographers, seven editors, six page

designers and two logo creators. It ran in our daily newspapers in Astoria and Pendleton, the Capital Press, which is our regional farm weekly based in Salem, and three weekly newspapers, the Chinook Observer in Long Beach, Washington, the Blue Mountain Eagle in John Day and the Wallowa County Chieftain in Enterprise.

I was put in charge by Forrester's deceptively simple statement, "We'll funnel the copy through Patrick."

It proved the largest and most rewarding project of my journalism career. I have a reasonable aptitude for organizing, so we divided up the assignments and began our research. Some talented writers took part, including Astorian environmental writer Cassandra Profita, who later moved to Oregon Public Broadcasting. Laura Sellers and Crindalyn Lyster were very important in the online presentation of all this important work.

The series was published in 10 parts in The Astorian, with packages running on consecutive editions in March, September and December 2006. The other papers ran it in similar groupings; the weekly papers ran their own pieces and condensed versions of the rest as space allowed. Our series logo was "Our Climate is Changing — ready or not." At least one of our sister publications redesigned it to remove the "ready" part.

It would earn awards from the Society of Professional Journalists, the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association and the annual Dolly Connelly Award for Northwest environmental reporting. Most significantly, it earned an award of merit in the annual Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment. This was presented by the Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting at the University of Rhode Island, an achievement that earned us national attention. As a sidelight, the Los Angeles Times package that won that year's top prize highlighted the amount of plastic clogging the world's oceans. That was prescient, too.

### Zealot

To me, it began just as a professional