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Earth Day evolves with knowledge

By Brent Hopkins, Staff Writer
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In the future, a spring ski trip to Mammoth could find no snow. California zinfandel grapes could shrivel into raisins. Zuma Beach could become Zuma Seafloor.

On the first Earth Day, celebrated 37 years ago, global warming was not a hot topic. People drove big, V-8 cars, burned leaves in their yards and tossed out bottles and newspapers.

Recycling was for hippies, and future technology would solve whatever problems came along.

Today, people drive hybrids, tote their bottles and cans to the recycling bin and nod approvingly as Al Gore hefts his Oscar for spreading the word of a world growing warmer.

Environmentalism has become somewhat hip, and global warming - or its less-politically loaded cousin, climate change - has entered popular consciousness like never before.

But scholars warn that's not enough.

"Global warming is not a problem of tomorrow," said Amy Luers, a climate scientist with the nongovernmental policy group Union of Concerned Scientists. "It's a problem of today."

Luers' group projects that the average temperature in California will rise about 1 to 2.3 degrees Fahrenheit in the next few decades no matter what. If we cut down on emissions, the temperature will still continue to go up another 3 to 5.5 degrees by the end of the century.

But if we only curb emissions somewhat, the temperatures are predicted to rise by about 5.5 to 8 degrees by 2100. And if we continue down the path to higher emissions, stoked by a growing population and continued reliance on fossil fuels, temperatures could climb an average 10 degrees.

That's when the really bad projections could come true.

At that point, wildfires would become 55 percent more frequent. Los Angeles would suffer through 100 more 90-degree-plus days each year. The Sierra Nevada spring snowpack would decrease by as much as 90 percent. The sea level would shoot upward. Wine grapes would die.

"The economic impacts are going to be huge if we don't do something," said Kassie Siegel, climate program director for the nonprofit conservation group Center for Biological Diversity.

"It'll be much, much cheaper to mitigate the effects of global warming than to adapt to it. There's moral arguments, there's ethical impacts, but just look at the economic impact."

Jerry Taylor does - and he doesn't care.

Taylor is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, a Washington-based public policy think tank, and he dismisses the debate about global warming as hysteria.

Not long after Earth Day celebrations began, he notes, there was a scare about global cooling, and that turned out to be nothing.

"The only people who paint a bleak picture are political activists with an ax to grind," Taylor said. "It's very difficult to find big disaster scenarios because very little of the U.S. economy is affected by the weather."

The sector that matters to Mike Conroy, however, is directly affected by the weather. He's a strawberry farmer with Conroy Farms Inc. who tends 150 acres of crops in Camarillo and Oxnard.

Conroy is keenly aware of the frost earlier this year and then Friday's long-awaited rain.

If it gets hotter, he said, farmers will find a way to adapt. Trading in his pickup for a Toyota Prius, he figures, won't make much of a difference.

"If I started trying to speculate about whether we have global warming or not, I'd be a basket case," he said. "I don't see that it would be that radical in my period of time. I've got five years left, so I don't know, but it's not something I stay awake worrying about."

