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Climate Change Is Here Now

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You can say this for 2011: There's never been a year quite like it.

Dangerous summer heat waves scorched the Midwest and East with record-high temperatures, causing at least 64 deaths. An unprecedented drought in Texas forced the government to declare the entire state a natural disaster area. Intense rainfall and snowmelt caused record flooding of the Mississippi River across the Midwest and South. Sea level is rising faster along the East Coast than it has for at least 2,000 years. Arctic sea ice fell to the lowest extent on record in July, with virtually no ice found off Alaska.

All this follows a slew of other climate-change related disasters (floods, blizzards, tornadoes) that have cost hundreds of lives, caused billions of dollars in damage and left some wondering: What's going on?

The unmistakable answer is clear: Climate change is no longer an abstract problem; climate change is here now; its effects are spinning out every single day across the planet. The impacts are wide-ranging, and increasingly they're intruding upon all aspects of our lives -- from increasing extreme weather events to rising sea levels that threaten densely populated coasts to the increasing instability of food and water supplies to our suffering health. According to the World Health Organization, hundreds of thousands of people are already dying from climate-related deaths each year.

And it isn't just people that are being hurt. Millions of species around the globe are seeing their world dramatically altered for the worse.

Polar bears and their cubs are dying because they're being forced to swim grueling distances across open

water when there's no sea ice to be found. Mountain species like the pika in the American West are being driven extinct at lower elevations by rising temperatures. Coral reefs worldwide and oysters and mussels along the West Coast are growing weaker as they're exposed to more acidic waters due to the ocean's absorption of human-made carbon dioxide.

A comprehensive new study found that the impacts of climate change are being felt among all groups of animals and plants all around the globe, and that if anything, the harmful effects of climate change exceed predictions. This study forecast that one in 10 species could face extinction by 2100 if climate change continues at the current pace.

Put simply, climate change poses the greatest threat in human history to the natural systems that sustain life on Earth, and the crisis is only deepening. The decade from 2000 to 2010 was the warmest on record, and 2005 and 2010 tied for the hottest years on record. So far, 2011 is shaping up for more of the same.

As alarming as the situation is, it doesn't have to be this way. We have the tools to create a different climate future. We already know what to do: reduce our burning of dangerous, dirty fossil fuels and increase energy efficiency. We have the technology and know-how needed to power a clean-energy transformation. And we have the levers to spur action, foremost among them the tried and true Clean Air Act, which has cost-effectively and efficiently reduced air pollutants and protected public health for four decades.

As the daily toll of climate change mounts, it's time to embrace the reality that the United States can wait no longer for meaningful action. Climate change is happening now, we are causing it, and the costs of inaction -- to us, to plants and animals, to the physical world that we depend on -- are too steep to ignore and pass to the coming generations.