

THE HILL



Climate chaos is bigger threat than space rocks

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How can we shield the earth from a major asteroid strike? That's the subject of a new series of high-profile Congressional hearings, even though scientists and NASA director Charles Bolden say the risk is quite small.

Meanwhile, many members of Congress are blocking every effort to protect Americans from a far greater planet-wrecking threat that is already upon us.

Climate change is here now and it is causing serious damage by increasing the risk of droughts, killer megastorms, crippling heat waves, and dangerous flooding, according to the draft National Climate Assessment, a recent federal report produced by hundreds of scientists.

These not-so-natural disasters don't strike from space, but they take a tremendous toll. Last year's Hurricane Sandy -- which scientists say was likely made stronger by climate change -- killed dozens of people and caused more than \$50 billion in damage.

And the future looks even grimmer. Think an asteroid would cause a lot of damage? As a scientist, I am deeply concerned that rising sea levels and stronger hurricanes will wreak relentless devastation on our coastal communities.

Climate change has already doubled the risk of megastorms, according to a new study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Extreme storm surges -- like the one that virtually drowned Atlantic City in 2012 -- could become 10 times more

frequent in coming decades, the study says. And by 2100 a Hurricane Katrina-sized storm could hit us every other year.

The risks of climate chaos are clear, and so is the cause: Our weather is changing and our planet is warming because our smokestacks and tailpipes pump more than 30 billion tons of manmade carbon pollution into the atmosphere every year. Last year, atmospheric carbon levels jumped by the second-highest amount on record.

And we shouldn't kid ourselves that America's recent modest pollution reductions are anything like what's needed to head off a climate catastrophe. We will suffer as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit of warming by the end of the century unless we make more ambitious cuts, according to the National Climate Assessment.

Yet efforts to curb carbon pollution are under attack. The U.S. EPA, for example, must soon finalize a carbon pollution reduction rule for new power plants, but some Washington insiders say the agency is considering delaying or weakening this important protection because of pressure from big polluters.

Congress has also taken aim at the Clean Air Act's authority to reduce carbon pollution through an amendment inserted into the latest budget debate. And high-profile leaders like Senator Marco Rubio continue to deny that manmade climate change is even a problem -- contrary to a massive body of scientific evidence.

The remote chance of a large asteroid hitting the earth is scary, and there may well be measures the federal government should take against space rocks. But it is disturbing to see political leaders so focused on a

relatively minor threat, even as they deny climate change's risks or pay mere lip service to a clear and present danger already causing so much harm today.

We're running out of time to make the changes necessary to head off the worst effects of climate change. The next few years will be critical. Our leaders should spend less time worrying about outer space and much more on reducing the greenhouse gas pollution threatening our future here on Earth.