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New York Climate Plan Should Push Obama to Act



Shaye Wolf
Climate science director,
Center for Biological Diversity

They were among Hurricane Sandy's youngest victims. Brandon and Connor Moore were just 2 and 4 years old when they were swept away from their mother by flood waters on Staten Island at the height of the storm last year.

Bristling with skyscrapers and corporate headquarters, New York City has an economy larger than that of most countries. But even residents of this powerful city are profoundly vulnerable to rising seas and killer storms.

That became disturbingly clear when Hurricane Sandy stormed ashore, killing dozens of New Yorkers and causing more than \$18 billion in damage to the city. Scientists warned that climate change could make future storms even worse.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg was listening. Now, some eight months after Sandy, New York's mayor has unveiled a \$20 billion plan to prepare the city for hurricanes, storm surges, and sea levels that could rise as much as 55 inches in the coming decades.

As a scientist, I applaud the mayor for trying to protect New Yorkers from climate chaos. But who's looking out for the rest of America? It's hard to understand why President Obama isn't responding to the climate crisis with the same urgency displayed by the leader of our largest city.

Hurricane Sandy, after all, wreaked havoc across a broad swath of the East Coast, affecting more than two dozen states. And there's more to come. Climate change loads storms with more energy and more water, and the risk of extreme weather is rising across much of the country.

New York is hardly the only coastal city endangered by storm surges. These devastating walls of water will become 10 times more frequent as the world warms, according to a recent study in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Science.

Even communities far inland will be threatened as climate change brings more heat waves and alters precipitation patterns, driving up the risk of both droughts and extreme flooding.

We're all vulnerable. And no American city -- even the Big Apple -- can go it alone against climate change. Better infrastructure can reduce risks up to a point, but we've got to address the problem's root.

Our planet is warming and our weather is becoming more dangerous because the world's power plants and tailpipes are pumping out more than 30 billion tons of manmade greenhouse gas pollution a year.

Atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations recently hit 400 parts per million, a level not seen for two to three million years or more.

And carbon emissions are still rising, putting us on track for as much as 9 degrees Fahrenheit of warming this century, according to a recent International Energy Agency analysis.

That's why President Obama must offer a bold national strategy for reducing extreme weather dangers by cutting greenhouse pollution. The president could do enormous good just by getting serious about wielding the Clean Air Act against heat-trapping gases.

Unfortunately, though, his administration has so far moved at a snail's pace. The Environmental Protection Agency has yet to even finalize a plan to regulate greenhouse emissions from new power plants.

Extreme weather could change that disturbing dynamic. As science reveals more and more links between our warming atmosphere and damaging weather, we're realizing that climate change's effects are already here -- and that they will become increasingly devastating.

Like Mayor Bloomberg, President Obama has spoken forcefully about climate disruption: The president has warned of the dangers our children face from "the destructive power of a warming planet."

New York's mayor understands that destructive power all too well, and now he has matched strong words with strong action. It's time for our president to do the same.

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