

Climate change “Inconvenient” for the Northwest

By: Graham Saunders (published in *Weather Whys*, Thunder Bay Chronicle-Journal, Sept. 24, 2006)

The film *An Inconvenient Truth* opened in Thunder Bay last Thursday. It is a high-profile film about the perils of climate change and has played to some full houses.

There is considerable interest in many city schools. I hear that some may bus students for special matinee screenings in the next week or two. College and university students are seeing the film too and some community organizations are planning group attendance.

Regular readers of *Weather Whys* are aware of my concerns that human induced climate change will have mainly negative impacts in the Northwest.

Yet “global warming” is a difficult issue, especially for Canadians. Canada and Russia tie for the coldest countries on Earth how about a few extra degrees in the winter?

People in Canada in favour of this got their wish. Most recent winters have been warmer than the long-term average. There have been benefits. Energy use for space heating has declined and snow removal is not usually the time or budget item when compared to the 1950s to 1970s.

There is a catch of course. Warmer temperatures mean that more precipitation will fall as rain. A shorter snow season means that skiing and other winter activities are less practical; businesses that are based on winter sports they are likely to become less economically viable.

Then there is the summer just past; I think it is safe to welcome the fall season now. Recent cool weather was the first cool week since February.

Temperatures averaged above normal throughout spring and summer. However, only occasional days could be described as hot. All those sunny and warm weekends were welcomed by most people.

Gardeners were pleased. We had abundance of cantaloupe and the first attempt at growing watermelons was a delicious success. Most people had bounty, if water was available.

We could not handle too many summers like this one. Last Thursday marked the first day without a report of a new forest fire since mid May. The season total in the Northwest was 1,692 fire starts and a burn area of 1405 sq. kilometres (Thursday).

Some features of this summer gave concern to people responsible for fire management. The fire season (FS) began ahead of (typical) schedule because of a combination of dry soil, sunshine and warm temperatures. It persisted through July, generally a quiet month. Then, then the FS increased in intensity and became the “fire flap” experienced earlier this month.

Another Restricted Fire Zone was declared for the Northwest region, which soon was followed by a Emergency Area Order for Thunder Bay and Nipigon Districts. Readers are familiar with media reports of shortages of resources, evacuations and the smell of smoke earlier in September.

Generally, fire fighting crews, aircraft and other resources are shared by numerous regions in North America. Weather patterns usually produce conditions that allow extreme fire behaviour in some areas but quiet situations in others.

It is expensive to fly people and equipment between jurisdictions, though no province or state could afford to have enough trained people or equipment to cope with extreme-case scenarios.

However, this summer was a busy one for all western provinces in Canada and most western states in the U.S. It was fortunate that Quebec had a relatively quiet fire season and could assist places from Los Angeles to Northwestern Ontario.

Worrisome trends and events

Intense fire seasons occur from time to time in this region and it was not a record year. The lightning, fire numbers and area burned are consistent with climate change (CC) though events this year do not confirm that CC is taking place.

However, there is related evidence. 2006 is part of a trend to larger burn areas annual totals in recent decades are 2.5 times more than the period 1950 to 1980, for example. As well, the fire situation and other potential signs of CC (reduced water levels of Lake Superior, increased severe weather, changes in snow patterns) are in keeping with more erratic weather events at our latitude around the world.

The most prominent area of concern is about higher latitudes - the Arctic where we see new processes and events. The European Space Agency said earlier this week that their satellite images showed "dramatic openings bigger than the British Isles in the Arctic's sea ice, normally permanently frozen. "This situation is unlike anything observed in previous record low ice seasons," Mark Drinkwater said.

He added, "It is highly imaginable that a ship could have . . .reach[ed] the North Pole without difficulty".

Scientist James Hansen, of the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration and widely considered a Dean of CC researchers recently warned, "I think we have a very brief window of opportunity to deal with climate change ... no longer than a decade, at the most. This is not something that is a theory. We understand the carbon cycle well enough to say that."

Al Gore, who reveals An Inconvenient Truth noted that CC is more than scientific data. It's is a story. "Look at what is happening to our planet now, what is likely to happen, and what we should do about it to prevent a catastrophe."

Perhaps the movie is part of a movement that keeps Hansens window from slamming shut.