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Citizen groups from all 50 states call for swift action on climate change

By Brent Martin

With the long August recess now behind them, Senators have returned to Washington, D.C., with a heavy workload. In addition to the momentous responsibility they have to pass legislation that reduces greenhouse gas emissions, they have an unprecedented opportunity to change America's future for the better. Comprehensive climate and energy legislation that passes the Senate can and must dedicate 5 percent of the funding generated by such a bill to safeguarding fish and wildlife and natural resources on which we all rely. Just two weeks ago, 22 North Carolina organizations joined more than 600 groups from all 50 states to do just that. The letter delivered to the Senate has a clear message — we need swift action on climate change that will both create jobs and protect our natural resources.

This call for action is based not only on protecting our environment, but on creating green jobs that will help our economy for generations to come. If funded properly, climate legislation will create conservation jobs nationwide, employing construction crews, engineers, scientists and others to restore America's landscapes and strengthen ecosystems so they can withstand disruptive changes, remove invasive species from natural areas, repair damaged watersheds and help revive rural economies. Furthermore, here in Western Northern Carolina, our outdoor recreation industry is dependent on healthy ecosystems — businesses that support fishing, rafting, and camping that are being threatened by the effects of global warming, putting at risk North Carolina's \$7.5 billion outdoor recreation economy. As the health of North Carolina's forests suffers, a range of business and vital ecosystem services are likely to be negatively affected, such as North Carolina's \$100 million per year Christmas tree industry.

We simply can no longer afford to ignore this important issue. Many areas of North Carolina's coastline are sinking at a rate of nearly 7 inches per century, and studies predict that sea level rise of 18 inches is possible by 2080, flooding more than 770 miles of the state's coast. Upland ecosystems are also affected as evidenced by a decline in high-elevation spruce firs, loss of brook trout habitat due to rising stream temperatures and the destruction of hemlock forests by invasive species.

Since mid-century, temperatures across the state have risen approximately 1.2 degrees and are expected to rise up to an additional 5 degrees by 2060. A temperature rise of just 4 degrees would cause central North Carolina to resemble the climate of central Florida. In coastal North Carolina, projections show a decrease of up to 8 inches in annual rainfall by 2060. These changes are significant, and the impacts are already being felt.

The House of Representatives has already passed legislation that establishes a national policy to better safeguard natural resources from global warming and provided 1 percent of revenues generated by the bill for these efforts. Ultimately, significantly more dedicated funding will be needed to address the impacts of climate change on our wildlife and natural resources. The Senate is standing at the crossroads of history and we need its leadership now to get the whole job done and ensure that climate legislation both reduces greenhouse gas emissions and safeguards natural resources, wildlife and our own communities threatened by the changes already set in motion.

Millions of Americans have spoken – it's time for the Senate to listen.

(Brent Martin lives in Franklin and works for the Wilderness Society. He can be reached at brent_martin@twc.org.)

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