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OUR OPINION

New federal report shows the need to address climate change now

Reiterating what a United Nations panel of scientists said in March, a U.S. government report released this week emphasized that climate change is already here. The effects include heat waves, wild storms and longer allergy seasons. And odds are that the changes are likely to get worse and more expensive before they get better.

Which means the United States not only must take the lead in efforts to mitigate climate change — such as a revenue-neutral carbon tax — but also find technologies and policies that can help communities adjust to the changes occurring around them. This is not an easy or cheap fix, but it also has the potential for creating jobs as new industries emerge and develop to create more sustainable energy sources.

Climate change's assorted harms "are expected to become increasingly disruptive across the nation throughout this century and beyond," the National Climate Assessment report concluded, emphasizing the impact of extreme weather events as well as simple warming. Some politicians and other wishful naysayers who think they're smarter than the scientists who actually study climate point to

the brutal winter just past as a sign that the climate isn't warming. But one winter does not a trend make, and 2013 still tied for the fourth-warmest year since record-keeping began in 1880 and marked the 37th consecutive year (since 1976) that the annual temperature was above the long-term average, according to the National Climatic Data Center.

"Climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present," the 840-page report says. "Corn producers in Iowa, oyster growers in Washington State and maple syrup producers in Vermont are all observing climate-related changes that are outside of recent experience. So, too, are coastal planners in Florida, water managers in the arid Southwest, city dwellers from Phoenix to New York and Native Peoples on tribal lands from Louisiana to Alaska. This National Climate Assessment concludes that the evidence of human-induced climate change continues to strengthen and that impacts are increasing across the country."

In the Midwest, the report says that in the long term, the combined stresses

associated with climate change are expected to decrease agricultural productivity and farmers can expect to see more crops damaged by extreme weather. Some farmers may benefit from longer growing seasons, but those benefits are likely to be offset by damage from floods, drought and other extreme weather. The report predicts that higher temperatures will not only push up air-conditioning bills but cause northern forests to recede and water levels in the Great Lakes to drop, affecting fish.

Miami, meanwhile, is trying to cope with increased flooding from rising waters, according to a Thursday New York Times article, and wildfires in the West are increasing to the point that the Obama administration is looking to change the way the government funds firefighting efforts. The impact of climate change is one of the three big issues in fighting fires, especially in the West, Robert Bonnie, undersecretary for Natural Resources & Environment in the Agriculture Department, told the Editorial Board last week.

The fund for fighting fires is estimated to be \$500 million short for the coming season, and while the federal government will find that money, it may have to be taken from other resources, including forest management in Wisconsin. A more

permanent solution is needed; proposals in Congress to provide a better way of funding efforts to fight a growing number of fires deserve support.

Despite the refusal of some on the far right to accept the reality in the very air around them, this is not — or should not be — a partisan issue. Jon Huntsman, former governor of Utah and one-time GOP candidate for president, pointed out as much in a New York Times op-ed last week: "While there is room for some skepticism given the uncertainty about the magnitude of climate change, the fact is that the planet is warming, and failing to deal with this reality will leave us vulnerable — and possibly worse. Hedging against risk is an enduring theme of conservative thought. It is also a concept diverse groups can embrace. If Republicans can get to a place where science drives our thinking and actions, then we will be able to make progress."

Huntsman is right. In the emerging climate change picture, some details may still be obscure. But the overall view isn't changing. Climate change is here; humans are causing it. Adjusting to that does not mean returning to the Stone Age or wrecking the economy. It does mean hard work and flexibility — and being willing to acknowledge scientific reality.