

# Timing Matters

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**By Melanie Lenart**

A December trip to Denver reminded me how cold the rest of the country gets during winter – and perhaps why many Americans continue to dismiss the threat of climate change.

We arrived in snow-slicked Denver in a car whose heater had conked out – unbeknownst to us, for lack of use. Coming back to Tucson sunshine felt like a kiss from an old friend.

Elsewhere, as the new year started, Florida oranges froze, and Minnesota dipped to 38 degrees below zero.

When it's cold, it can be tough to convince people that global warming is real. Or that it's a bad thing for the planet. People forget that even a warming climate can still include cold winters, and years that are colder than the one before it. That's why I was happy to hear some decent news on the climate change front, both internationally and locally.

Internationally, the Copenhagen climate talks came to a reasonably encouraging conclusion. President Obama and other world leaders agreed to slow the temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius. (But keep in mind that's 3½ degrees Fahrenheit – and probably more in our region, which is warming faster than the world as a whole.)

President Obama still faces an uphill task in getting a climate agreement from Congress. Some senators in particular vow to resist an international treaty, and this is no empty threat. Their predecessors managed to block U.S. involvement in the current climate treaty following similar climate talks in Kyoto.

Yet I'm encouraged by the Obama Administration's selection of a Tucson local, Kathy Jacobs, to serve in the White House as an assistant director for climate adaptation and assessment.

I worked with Kathy Jacobs on a couple of projects, and even had the chance to socialize with her a few times. Consider that my disclosure. But also consider that this informs my vote of confidence.

Jacobs has a fine mind, a respectful way of making her point clear, and an ability to bring projects to a timely, successful closure. Just what Washington needs on the climate front.

Timeliness, and its distant cousin timing, make a big difference in whether people worry about the climate. Few folks distinguish between weather and climate, so weather

becomes important in people's minds. Our work together on a December 2004 press conference on climate change and water in Arizona is a case in point. Jacobs and others explained how the overall temperature rise was likely to increase evaporation rates even as it prematurely melted some of the snow that stored Colorado River water. Informative stuff.

Unfortunately, hardly any reporters showed up. Remember, this was before Hurricane Katrina alerted Americans to the dangers of warming seas. It was before Al Gore's message, delivered so well in the 2006 movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, transformed climate change into dinner conversation.

As we talked about the sparsely attended 2004 briefing, we realized that our timing was off. In December, people are not concerned about more heat.

Perhaps it was no accident that a 2006 conference on climate change and water, where Jacobs moderated a panel of speakers she recruited, was held in Phoenix in June – the hottest, driest month of the year. That event drew hundreds of people.

I thought about the timing issue again this past December, as I drove home from Denver with a blanket draped over my lap, listening to the occasional radio report about the climate talks.

December in frigid Copenhagen was not the most compelling time and place to reach a climate agreement. In that context, maybe it's just as well they put off the hard part – agreeing exactly how to slow the temperature increase – until a November meeting in Mexico City.

Mexico City is a fairly ideal setting for an effort to brake our hurtling toward higher temperatures. A tropical locale, Mexico City remains convincingly hot in November. And there's another factor that favors concern.

The same smokestacks, tailpipes and electricity plants warming the planet also pollute the air. Nowhere is this more relevant than in Mexico City, where just breathing the air equates to smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. What's more, higher temperatures generally make air pollution even worse, as evidenced from ozone levels during heat waves in Los Angeles, New York and Phoenix.

Most world residents support reducing global pollution as we figure out what's ahead on the road to climate change. Debating this issue in the big-city heat and smog of Mexico City almost guarantees the people arguing against pollution will pull ahead.

Now, if there were only a way to shift the meeting date to early June, by week's end we'd probably have a treaty dripping with ink from eager signatories.

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