

Climate change: The "distant future" is here

Written by Lee A. Daniels, NNPA Columnist
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One of the classic commercials of the 1970s, when technological advances in food processing made it possible to enhance the flavor of margarine, posed an actress as Mother Nature about to ecstatically praise the taste of what she thought was her creation: "My delicious butter."

But then she's informed by the voice-over that it's actually margarine she's tasting – "so delicious it fooled even you, Mother Nature." Mother Nature rises from her seat with a look of fury, spreads her arms amid a peal of thunder and a flash of lightning and angrily declares, "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature!"

Nowadays, every new scientific study about the effects of global warming is telling us it's not nice to fool with Mother Nature, either.

Seawater flooding the world's low-lying coastal regions and cities. More frequent torrential rainstorms overwhelming the drainage systems of some urban areas and washing away nutrient-rich topsoil in some farm regions, while intense longer-lasting heat waves extend the desert or bake the profitability out of farming in other regions. The displacement of huge numbers of people fleeing severe climatic changes – leading to wrenching economic and political crises in some countries and a greater worldwide instability.

Two recent reports by large groups of scientists – one discussing the global effects of climate change released last fall by the United Nations; the second, focusing on the United States – have made it clear that all this and more are no longer fictional doomsday scenarios of humankind's distant future. "Climate change, once considered an issue for the distant future, has moved firmly into the present."

That declaration, from the National Climate Assessment study, which comprehensively examined the situation in the U.S., is part of the backdrop for the new initiative on climate change the Obama administration announced last week to reduce the nation's output of carbon dioxide and other emissions that contribute to global warming.

The new draft rule unveiled by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) unveiled would reduce carbon pollution from the nation's 600-plus power plants by 30 percent by 2030 from 2005 levels – the equivalent, agency officials said, of taking two-thirds of all cars and trucks in America off the roads.

That accomplishment would reduce energy coming from coal – a major contributor to the greenhouse gases that produce global warming – to 30 percent from the present 40 percent. The federal agency said the effort would cost the economy from \$7- to \$9-billion a year but lead to benefits over the long term of \$55 to 93 billion and lead to lower electricity bills for businesses and individual consumers when the plan is fully implemented in 2030.

Agency officials stressed that their proposals give states great flexibility on how each will meet the new standards. The new federal rules won't be finalized until June 2015 in order to allow for public comment; and states will have another year after that to submit compliance plans or seek an extension.

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EPA officials acknowledge the new rules by themselves won't end the threat of the long-term catastrophic effects of climate change. In fact, only concerted global action can do that. But they, and a large majority of scientists, assert that it would mark a significant advance for global as well as national action. For example, along with other regulations, it would enable the U.S. to meet its commitment to the United Nations to cut carbon pollution by 17 percent by 2020, and put more pressure on China and India, and other major polluting countries to also take concerted action.

In other words, the "science" of climate change and the need for the U.S. to take substantial steps to reduce its contribution to it is irrefutably clear.

It's the "politics" of reducing global warming, however, that promise a fierce battle between the Republicans and the Obama administration likely to surpass that over Obamacare. It's not just a matter of the "normal" political differences one could expect from the fossil fuels industry and other allied business interests that has already been expressed via business lobbyists in Washington and Congressional Republicans. That was present as well in the political debate over the 1970 Clean Air Act, the legislative authority under which the EPA is acting now.

No, the battle now underway will be another significant chapter in the GOP effort to use any and every issue to derail the Obama administration. Adding further fuel to that fire are the looming 2014 mid-term elections, and the jockeying already going on within the GOP for its 2016 presidential nomination.

One can only hope that the seductive lure of being caught up in the rough political storms ahead won't distract the American public from remembering the fundamental fact about global warming: the distant future of climate change is here.



*Lee A. Daniels is a longtime journalist in New York. His most recent book is *Last Chance: The Political Threat to Black America*.*