



Tribune editorial: The enigma of the warmest year

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Last year was the hottest ever recorded in the lower 48 states, a full degree above the previous record of 1998.

The warm year and unseasonably warm winter, slowly rising sea levels and the lack of a record cold month since 1983 are helping revive concerns about climate change. The debate is mostly between the fearful left, which demands that we dial back our energy use regardless of cost, and the skeptical right, which says turn up the air conditioner to resist any loss of freedom.

Record variations in the weather are no proof of a warmer climate; some parts of the world escaped the heat we felt. Florida has had seven hotter years, even though 2012 was 1.2 degrees above average.

Tampa averaged 74.8 degrees last year, or 1.4 degrees above its 30-year average. Only one year has been warmer in 73 years. Many U.S. cities had historic increases. Buffalo was 3.9 degrees above its 30-year average. Des Moines was 5.2 above. Chicago was 4.6. Globally, it was not the hottest year on record, but will be in the top 10.

Rep. Bernie Sanders, an Independent from Vermont, is introducing legislation calling for higher spending on energy efficiency, more energy research and better transportation infrastructure, along with higher taxes for the oil and gas industries.

It's not likely to pass because the vast majority of Americans aren't ready to make big investments or sacrifices. First, they want to understand what impact various policy and tax changes might have on temperatures. People aren't going to voluntarily pay more for energy if there's no likely return on that investment.

Resistance to substantially lowering greenhouse emissions would be enormous, should anyone seriously suggest it.

We hear much criticism from the political left that Republicans have their heads in the sand and are delaying climate action. Usually overlooked is the precise nature of the action that might be taken. Small measures won't make a dent in the problem. Even

changes big enough to slow down the U.S. economy might do little or nothing on a global scale.

The 2012 platform of the Democratic Party called global climate change "an economic, environmental, and national security catastrophe in the making," but dared ask for no public sacrifice in the fight against it.

Using less energy to accomplish similar tasks is good economics and good public policy, regardless of any climate impact. Cutting your electric bill and fuel bill is its own reward. Mass transit in cities is smart, regardless of emissions benefits.

Other issues, such as whether to prohibit the Keystone XL pipeline, are distractions, not solutions. The Cato Institute reported that building the pipeline to deliver 800,000 barrels of oil a day from the Alberta tar sands would have an impact on the climate only because the oil takes 15 to 20 percent more energy to extract and refine than oil from the Middle East, which it might replace. Total national oil consumption wouldn't change.

A good starting point in the climate debate would be to set up a nonbiased government agency to calculate the usefulness of mitigation proposals or possibilities. What if we switch to cars that go twice as far on a gallon of gas?

The United States should strive to be a global leader in energy efficiency. But we also should proceed sensibly, consider economic consequences and remember our advances likely will have small impact in a world where more people are driving and 59 countries are planning to build 1,200 new coal-fired power plants.

A major breakthrough in renewable energy would dramatically change the outlook, so continued research is vital. But the nation would be foolish to shellshock the economy by trying to abruptly abandon affordable fossil fuels, particularly relatively clean natural gas.

An important issue for Florida is the proper regulatory response to the threat of higher tides. Scientists have confirmed that sea levels around the world are rising, up about 7 inches during the 20th century. Some experts foresee an increase of two to six feet in the next 100 years. Smart coastal planning is imperative. Dense development on fragile barrier islands should be avoided.

It would be foolish to presume that all dramatic predictions are wrong or that new technologies will appear in time to save the day. It would be equally foolish to resign ourselves to energy poverty. A good rule to follow in uncertain times is to first do no additional harm.