

Carbon increases, apathy holds steady

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The number has been rising for a few hundred years, since before the United States was a country. This spring, according to The Associated Press, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels in the Arctic have reached 400 parts per million.

CO₂ is the primary greenhouse gas, the chief culprit in Earth's rising temperatures. It is released when humans burn carbon-based fuels - coal, gasoline, oil, natural gas.

We've been doing a lot of that. Across the planet, carbon dioxide emissions totaled a record 34.8 billion tons in 2011, up 3.2 percent from 2010, according to an International Energy Agency announcement in May.

The result of all that use of all those fossil fuels has been utterly predictable. Carbon dioxide persists in the atmosphere for 100 years, meaning that the effects are cumulative.

Earth's temperatures are climbing - the last decade was the warmest recorded - and sea levels are rising. Among American communities, Hampton Roads is one of the most vulnerable to those effects.

This spring, according to the AP, CO₂ levels crossed 400 ppm in Alaska, Norway, Iceland and Greenland. Scientists say levels in those places will fall this summer as plants take up the gas in photosynthesis, so the annual average will likely drop.

But that won't change the trend. Before the Industrial Revolution, carbon dioxide levels were about 275 ppm. Many scientists say about 350 ppm is the highest "safe level" of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. But levels have reached about 395 parts per million across the planet, concentrations that haven't been seen in 800,000 years. Or more.

Climate scientists worry that accelerating increases in CO₂ concentrations could mean two equally disturbing problems: That there's so much greenhouse gas in the atmosphere that it may be impossible to prevent catastrophic warming. And that Earth's warming might accelerate along with CO₂ levels in the atmosphere.

Perhaps still more worrisome is what we're doing about it: Nothing.

As Jerry Taylor, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute pointed out to The AP, this country's politics means there will be no change in environmental policy no matter how high carbon dioxide levels get.

Taylor is right.

A symbolic milestone in the Arctic won't matter to people - including presidential candidates, members of Congress, lobbyists, governors and legislators - who reject scientific theory and evidence because they don't like the implications.

But it should matter to them, and to everyone else.