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ENVIRONMENT

Scientist: Global warming real threat

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BELLINGHAM — Despite the overwhelming evidence that air pollution is making the globe hotter and threatening massive disruption of human life, the U.S. government is doing little or nothing to address the problem, a University of Washington scientist said Wednesday.

"We bear responsibility for this problem but we have no coherent strategy," said Thomas Ackerman, professor of atmospheric sciences. "There are solutions, but we need to act now."

Ackerman, director of the Joint Institute for the Study of the Atmosphere and Ocean, spoke at Western Washington University's Fairhaven College as part of the World Issues Forum series.

Ackerman said he wasn't indulging in partisan bashing of President Bush. The previous administration's record wasn't much better.

"Clinton and Gore did no more on climate change," he said, referring to former President Bill Clinton and his vice president, Al Gore. "We are just not taking this seriously."

Ackerman said the world's biggest industrial nations need to take drastic steps to move toward eventual elimination of carbon dioxide from burning fuels. That means alternative energy sources, conservation and anything else we can think of, for decades to come.

"We don't do it all at once and we don't do it by one single thing," Ackerman said.

If nothing is done, mankind faces dramatic rises in sea level that would flood land now occupied by millions of people. Glaciers and snowfields that provide Western Washington's drinking water could dwindle to near nothing in a few generations, Ackerman said.

He noted that Bellingham, Seattle and many other cities already have launched their own programs to reduce carbon dioxide.

"They are the people who have to deliver water to your house," Ackerman said. "The people who care about this are the people who manage the resources."

He expressed impatience with those who still argue that global warming from fossil fuel emissions is an unproven theory. At this point, the consensus in the scientific community is near unanimous, he said, and nearly all experts believe that global warming from pollution has been demonstrated to a 95 percent certainty level.

"In my business, that's as good as it gets," said Ackerman, who attended Lynden Christian schools.

Ackerman also contended that dubious scientific information denying global warming is being circulated by industry groups with self-serving agendas.

"Go ask those guys where the peer-reviewed science is," Ackerman said. "It's not a controversy in the peer-reviewed science literature. It's only a controversy on certain Web sites."

He also scoffed at the idea that scientists like himself, who present evidence for global warming, are part of a conspiracy, or are being paid to promote the theory.

"If I could show that global warming was not a problem, I would do it in a heartbeat, and I would make a lot more money than I'm making now," Ackerman said.

That got a rise out of audience member Don Easterbrook, WWU geology professor emeritus, who has challenged some of the data that Ackerman and other atmospheric scientists rely on.

Easterbrook expressed irritation at any suggestion he was in the pay of industry groups. He insisted that studies of ancient Greenland ice have shown that today's climate shifts are no different from shifts that occurred in the past.

Easterbrook and Ackerman then exchanged contradictory assertions about climate data, interrupting one another at times.

But after Ackerman's lecture, Easterbrook said he shared Ackerman's view that mankind must take steps to curb emissions of carbon dioxide from burning fuels.

While the current global warming trend could be explained by factors other than carbon dioxide, Easterbrook said it was possible that the rise in carbon dioxide levels would accelerate that global warming and create disruptive changes in climate.

"The real answer is, we don't know, and therefore we shouldn't be fooling with it," Easterbrook said. "I fully support reduction of carbon dioxide ... We're already at places we haven't been before. It's not nice to fool with Mother Nature."