

# The Washington Post

## Can the Va. GOP rise to the challenge of climate change?

By Stephen Nash June 6, 2014

The [National Climate Assessment](#) released last month tells us that climate disruption and its heat, droughts and floods [are already upon us](#), bringing abrupt, at times catastrophic, change to the United States. It also tells us that things will continue to worsen, especially if we do not act.

For most Republican Virginia lawmakers, perhaps that's a ho-hum development — just one more example of federal fiddling and misguided research. Little response can be anticipated from them. Democrats may hold the governorship and a hair's-breadth state Senate advantage, but the GOP-dominated House of Delegates remains largely climate-intransigent.

Or maybe that's wrong. For one thing, there's reality and its handmaiden, political pragmatism, to take into account; there are challenges ahead, and voters want leaders willing to face them. For another, Republicans have a conservative legacy of clear thinking about science and the environment to draw upon.

On the practical side:

- [The Post last week reported](#) the latest in a series of stories about coastal Virginia, which is trying to adapt to encroaching seas in the absence of state leadership. “Clearly, we’ve got more work to do,” said Ron Williams Jr., Norfolk’s assistant city manager for planning. He considered the coming submersion of the city’s new [\\$300 million light rail system](#): “Nowhere do we have resiliency built in,” he said.

- A compilation of data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows that, since 1975, the statewide annual mean temperature in Virginia has increased an average of 0.46 degrees Fahrenheit per decade, a rate of 4.6 degrees per century, according to Robert Livezey, former chief of Climate Services at the National Weather Service. Scientists agree that if this trend continues, it will ratchet up the risk of dangerous and environmentally destabilizing climate change.

- At current rates, and given current global carbon dioxide emissions, sea level is projected to rise [two more feet](#) along coastal Virginia by 2050 and 5.6 feet by 2100.

Assuming the current level of flood protection, just two feet of sea-level rise [could inundate 82 square miles of dry land and 660 square miles of wetlands in Virginia](#). [Sixteen miles of the state’s interstate highways](#) would be submerged or at risk in storm surges, along with 47 miles of principal arterial streets, 54 miles of the national highway system, 52 miles of railroad and 35 percent of the acreage of our ports and their shipping facilities.

- [Sixty percent](#) of Virginia is blanketed by forests. They, too, are at risk from heat, drought, fire and insect infestation, as are the natural systems they support. Those changes are already [advancing in the western United States](#), the new federal assessment pointed out.

Here's how a [2009 state Department of Game and Inland Fisheries climate strategy](#) document, prepared in concert with the National Wildlife Federation and Virginia Conservation, summarized the outlook: "Over 900 of Virginia's wildlife species are believed to be imperiled by the ongoing loss or degradation of their habitats. During the coming decades, climate change will exacerbate and intensify these impacts and the consequences to wildlife could be profound."

It is hard to imagine any government failing to act in the face of such threats. A unified Virginia legislature could join many other states in doing what it can to minimize disruption. [Maryland](#), for instance, is already on its second round of bipartisan initiatives to cut greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to climate change impacts and reap the economic benefits of innovation.

As for conservative principles: Former GOP presidential candidate Jon M. Huntsman Jr. [wrote in May](#) that "So obtuse has become the party's dialogue on climate change that it's now been reduced to believing or not believing, as if it were a religious mantra."

He added, "This is a shortsighted strategy that is wrong for the party, wrong for the country and wrong for the next generation."

In fact, from the wilderness advocate Theodore Roosevelt through Richard Nixon, who formed the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) and fostered the first [Clean Air Act](#), support for science and protecting the environment have been esteemed as closely bound up with conservative thought.

In Virginia, the Republican Party historically has been associated with the conservative values of prudence, planning and good government — all of which argue for taking action. No less a Virginia GOP stalwart than former senator John Warner has argued that global warming is a front-burner issue: “Leading military and security experts agree that if left unchecked, global warming could increase instability and lead to conflict in already fragile regions of the world. We ignore these facts at the peril of our national security and at great risk to those in uniform who serve this nation,” [he said a few years ago](#) in announcing a climate campaign.

In reconsidering climate change — the most serious conservation challenge in the history of humankind — Republicans can also hearken to the late [Russell Kirk](#), revered co-founder of the conservative flagship *National Review*. As Kirk once wrote: “[There is nothing more conservative than conservation.](#)”

The writer is a research scholar at the University of Richmond. His new book, due out this fall, is “[Virginia Climate Fever: How Global Warming Will Transform Our Cities, Shorelines, and Forests.](#)”

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/can-the-va-gop-rise-to-the-challenge-of-climate-change/2014/06/05/1b6d21b0-e1de-11e3-810f-764fe508b82d\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/can-the-va-gop-rise-to-the-challenge-of-climate-change/2014/06/05/1b6d21b0-e1de-11e3-810f-764fe508b82d_story.html)