

The leaders we have been waiting for.

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The presidential election rushes towards us, but the Earth is not a hot topic. The downward spiral of sea-ice and snow cover in the Arctic is being ignored by the campaigns, despite new record lows that suggest the Arctic will be largely ice-free by late summer in a decade. The connection to the record temperatures and drought that have humbled America's food harvest are being airbrushed away.

No politicians are addressing the critical and tragic questions. How can we feed the world's people as extreme floods and droughts, driven by accelerating climate change, bring food scarcity? How many will starve this winter while we burn some of our shrunken corn supply as alcohol in our cars?

Last year the primary drought was in Texas, and the Governor's response was to pray for rain. This year the drought has spread across the heartland of the United States, and the political response is to deny that it is connected to national policies that are driving global climate change.

In our small state, Efficiency Vermont – the first energy-efficiency utility in the nation – has saved Vermont homes, businesses and schools millions of dollars in reduced energy costs through incentives and educational efforts. It is a small but important step toward transforming our society into an efficient one powered by renewable sources of energy.

Yet in the unreal world of Congress, Rep. Sandy Adams (R-Fla.), who sits on the House Science and Technology Committee, got 181 votes in favor when she introduced an amendment that would “prohibit the use of funds for maintaining, developing or creating any Web site which disseminates information regarding energy efficiency and educational programs on energy efficiency specifically to children under 18 years of age.”

How dangerous that our children might glimpse the truth: Either we create an energy-efficient society with open eyes or no amount of fossil fuel money can hide the collapse that is rushing towards us.

Policy analyst Dan Sarewitz has suggested that science actually makes environmental controversies worse, because “science supplies contesting parties with their own bodies of relevant legitimated facts about nature.”

In essence, each side selects the evidence that supports their case. The political world, where creative lying is now accepted, goes further and fabricates the supporting “evidence.”

In Vermont we see this played out in the controversy over wind power. At the core is a value issue – whether we want our ridgelines to be part of our working landscape, supplying us with local renewable power for decades to come, or whether undisturbed ridgelines are such a sacred part of Vermont's self-image that putting large turbines on them is unthinkable.

But we are not seeing a reasoned debate about this fundamental value choice. Wind developers are methodically plodding through the engineering and environmental steps to get approval from the Public Service Board, while opponents are rushing in to demonize wind farms on ridgelines, using selective “evidence” to make people fearful.

Exceptions are rare but informative. In Grafton, Allan Sands, the chairman of the Select Board and a retired Vermont state forester, says the key is to become educated firsthand. He is arranging visits to the Lempster wind project in New Hampshire, which has been operating since 2008. He said a lot of his concerns were dispelled by the visit and by talking to residents. He reports that the project site has experienced three or four dead bats, but the area around the towers shows clear signs of bear, deer and moose.

As campaigns based on fear undermine our society, it is wise to remember that it is the truth that sets us free. But it is up to us to take a stand. As 97-year-old activist Grace Lee Boggs succinctly puts it: “We are the leaders we've been waiting for.”