

# Was an Opportunity to Address Climate Change Sacrificed on the Altar of Bipartisanship?

By Don Sutherland

Last Thursday, President Biden announced a bipartisan agreement on infrastructure investment had been struck. He stated that he would sign the deal, but only in tandem with separate legislation adopted through reconciliation that would address, among other things, climate change. On Saturday, under heavy fire from Republicans who largely reject the overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change, he broke the linkage and declared that he would sign the infrastructure legislation on its own. Although it contains modest provisions aimed at moving away from fossil fuels, the infrastructure legislation was largely stripped of substantive commitments to address climate change. By itself, it would put the U.S. nowhere close to moving onto a path that could lead to net zero emissions by 2050.

To borrow from Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*, this arrangement represents "a deal of skimble-skamble stuff." Following four-years of an anti-science Administration that withdrew the U.S. from the Paris climate agreement and reversed the nation's modest progress toward addressing climate change, a rare opportunity for credible actions to address climate change was sacrificed. That this rare opportunity was sacrificed on the altar of bipartisanship amidst the siren song of promised job creation will not soothe the laws of physics. The laws of physics do not operate on the basis of human wishes or political considerations.

The hollowing of what had initially been a promising re-start to addressing climate change occurred as the Pacific Northwest is experiencing an unprecedented heatwave just weeks after the Southwest had experienced its most severe early-season heatwave on record and, just before that, the Northern Plains saw their highest temperatures on record for early June. On June 4, Bismarck saw the thermometer reach 106°. That was 4° warmer than any prior temperature recorded that early in the season and 23 days earlier than any such temperature on record. From June 13-20, Tucson recorded a record 8 consecutive 110° or hotter days. The prior record was 6 days. Amidst that same heatwave, Phoenix experienced 6 consecutive 115° or hotter days beating its old record of 4 days by 50%. Phoenix also experienced its earliest temperature of 116° or above (118° on June 17) and its earliest minimum temperature of 91° or above (June 17).

These extreme heat events are not isolated occurrences. They have taken place during a time of relentlessly warming summers.

**Table 1: Phoenix's Average Summer Temperatures (30-Year Moving Average)**

30-Year Period Ending	Summer Mean Temperature	Summer High Temperature	Summer Low Temperature
1980	89.7°	103.2°	76.1°
1990	91.0°	104.3°	77.8°
2000	92.2°	104.7°	79.8°
2010	93.1°	104.9°	81.3°
2020	93.7°	105.4°	82.0°

**Table 2: Seattle’s Average Summer Temperatures (30-Year Moving Average)**

<b>30-Year Period Ending</b>	<b>Mean Temperature</b>	<b>High Temperature</b>	<b>Low Temperature</b>
1980	63.0°	72.8°	53.3°
1990	63.8°	73.5°	54.0°
2000	63.9°	73.5°	54.3°
2010	64.1°	73.7°	54.5°
2020	64.9°	74.5°	55.3°

Although Seattle’s summers are vastly cooler than Phoenix’s, Seattle has experienced a rapid increase in the probability of 90° days. For example, for the June 26-28 period, which marks the height of the ongoing extreme heat event, the statistical probability of a 90° or above temperature was just 0.1% during the 1951-80 period. During the current climate period (1991-20), the statistical probability had increased to 2.0%. In terms of actual outcomes, the 1951-80 period saw no 90° days. The 1991-20 period reached 90° or above on 4.4% of days. That the actual outcome exceeded the statistical probability is consistent with a dynamic, warming climate.

When discussing the likely peak of the heat, Seattle National Weather Service forecaster Maddie Kristell told *The Seattle Times*, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but anywhere from 108 to 110 degrees is not out of the question. She added, “It’s difficult to pin an event down like this, when we don’t have a previous event to compare it to.”

These recent events occur after the world has warmed about 1.2°C over the pre-industrial period. Delays in curbing greenhouse gas emissions will lead to further warming according to the laws of physics. The climate models are clear about the implications that lie ahead: more extreme heat events, more frequent and severe drought, and more extreme weather events. The Pacific Northwest’s heatwave offers a glimpse of tomorrow’s climate, if society chooses to do little, be it on account of climate change denial or putting bipartisanship ahead of leadership in addressing priorities.

Some might argue that the jobs that would be created in the infrastructure bill and the improvements in physical infrastructure provide sufficient basis for moving ahead. But if one steps back to the bigger picture, one that includes a view of trade-offs, the long-term costs of continued delay in addressing climate change greatly exceed the short-term benefits that would accrue from the agreement.

In the end, this “skimble-skamble” deal marks the triumph of political expedience over the requirements of leadership. Absent a companion climate component—and the Republican Party will likely pocket the bipartisan deal and use it in the 2022 campaign when seeking election—while continuing to thwart any effective response to climate change. Perversely, the Republican Party’s success in using the infrastructure agreement to strengthen its political position would further undermine prospects for meaningful climate change legislation.

Without meaningful climate change legislation, U.S. commitments at Glasgow’s COP26 conference in November will lack substance. The world will have legitimate basis to question

whether the U.S. can or will embrace the concrete commitments necessary to achieve the Paris climate agreement's goals. Other states, particularly those rich in fossil fuels, will gain opportunity to resist addressing climate change. There could be real risk that the entire global effort to combat climate change could falter even as climate change is now manifesting itself more and more in weather events. If so, one might be able to look back to June 2021 as the time when a rare opportunity to address climate change was sacrificed on the altar of bipartisanship—bipartisan agreement to delay action on climate change policy.