

IPCC Report is a Call for Action that Should be Heeded

By Don Sutherland

Last week, the IPCC released its synthesis report for its Sixth Assessment. This new report highlighted the growing urgency of the climate situation and warned about a “rapidly narrowing” opportunity to avert the worst of the damage. That latitude for action still exists is crucial. The window of opportunity for action means humanity can still choose its course and the future it will leave to future generations—today’s young and those who will be born in the future.

Even as the IPCC had previously declared that it is “unequivocal” that human activities have warmed the climate, a large gap between what humanity must do to address the problem and what humanity is doing, has persisted. This persistent gap is eroding the capital of humanity’s “agency” or ability to tackle the worsening problem that currently exists.

Climate change deniers, the vast majority of whom will long be gone by the time the worst effects of climate change manifest themselves, will likely continue to respond negatively. Some will deny the existence of the problem altogether. Some will push the false narrative of flawed data. Some will argue that the costs of action are too great when, in fact, the costs of inaction vastly outweigh the investments necessary to act. A few on the fringes will resort to baseless conspiracy theories, massive deflection, and absurd claims that the current period of rapid warming is some kind of “climate optimum.”

They have no credibility. They have lost when it comes to both physics and evidence. They offer nothing but naked belief. Their noise does not provide useful information to guide leaders and other policy makers. Their siren calls of selfish obfuscation and shortsighted delay condemn future generations to a much worse world.

Rational, enlightened, and foresightful policy must be geared to seize the opportunity that remains available. On the supply side, leaders need to make investments and offer incentives to promote the rapid growth of clean technologies. On the demand side, the fossil fuel industry, and other actors whose products yield greenhouse gases, need to pay for the externalities they impose on society and the damages their products inflict through climate change-enhanced disasters. Policy muddle—a mixture of initiatives to address climate change offset at least partially by contradictory efforts to sustain or grow fossil fuel production—needs to be avoided.

At the end of the day, policy makers can still choose to leave humanity with a less hot, more productive, and more sustainable world. Inaction will strip humanity of its capacity to choose its future. Action must follow this report and that action should be decisive.