

Diplomats and ducks

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The past 10 years have been the warmest since scientists began keeping global temperature records in 1850.

"It's very likely the warmest period for at least the last 1,000 or 1,300 years," said Michel Jarraud, secretary general of the World Meteorological Society. He spoke this month at an international global warming conference in Bali, Indonesia.

Eleven of the 12 warmest years on record have occurred since 1995. Glaciers are melting around the world. Arctic sea ice has been decreasing, as has snow cover in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

Greenhouse gas emissions have grown by 70 percent since the 1970s. Analysis of ice core samples show that carbon dioxide and methane concentrations in the atmosphere are now significantly above the natural range of the past 650,000 years. That is, as they say, the view from 30,000 feet. Closer to home, the view is just as ominous.

Missouri's average winter temperature over the past decade is about two degrees higher than the previous peak during the 1930s. This month's spectacular snowstorm stands as an exception to what has become the rule - short winters, with little or no snow cover.

Farmers, hunters and hikers can tell you that fall has been milder in Missouri lately. Winter has come later. So, too, do migratory game birds such as ducks and geese. Peak hunting days in some state conservation areas are a full week later than the average of the past 30 years.

Wetlands here remain free of ice longer than they traditionally have. Migratory birds are staying longer as a result, a fact reflected in part by longer duck-hunting seasons.

Warmer temperatures have caused creatures great and small to alter their behavior, changing where they live, when they nest and when they breed. That's impossible to miss.

Yet when a New York Times reporter visited with Missouri hunters recently, he found them reluctant to attribute the changes they see from their hunting blinds to the changes noted by environmentalists.

Maybe that's because, while people have been hunting ducks on these lands for 10,000 years or more, the first scientific records are scarcely older than a century.

Or perhaps it's because, as scientific evidence of global warming piles up and expert opinion solidifies, the issue has become increasingly politicized.

A whole industry of global warming denial has sprung up, similar to the purveyors of smoke and mirrors who sprang to the defense of Big Tobacco after early scientific studies linked smoking with lung cancer. The overwhelming scientific consensus is that global warming is "unequivocal," and that the burning of fossil fuel is almost certainly the cause.

But all that hot air has real consequences. Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt last week refused to join other Midwestern governors in a regional carbon dioxide cap-and-trade agreement. Blunt, the only Midwestern governor not to send a representative to the meeting at which that system was worked out, said he didn't believe regional agreements could solve what he called "a national problem."

But the Bush administration, in thrall to energy-industry donors, has blocked efforts to establish a national cap-and-trade system. As Blunt surely is aware, that's why the regional systems have been created.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration worked furiously during the Bali conference to block any real international effort to fight global warming by creating a multinational cap-and-trade system. That's tragic.

For politicians in Washington and Jefferson City, diplomats in Bali and duck hunters in rural Missouri, the evidence of significant climate change is getting more difficult - and more dangerous - to ignore.

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