Smith must consider future climate

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At some point during his World War II service in the Navy, former Sen. Mark Hatfield decided that war was unspeakable and should be avoided at almost any cost. His commitment, to avoid sending Americans to fight Washington's wars later caused Hatfield endless political trouble, because it often pitted him against powerful members of his party. At the same time, it is precisely this long-term vision and willingness to cross enemy lines in Washington that preserves his legacy.

Oregon Senator Gordon Smith, too, stands on a battle-scarred landscape -- Oregon in its driest year in recorded history. Smith is fighting an uphill battle in Congress to obtain basic survival needs for Oregon's newest endangered species, the Klamath Basin farmer. Smith, too, has an opportunity to join a few others who are bucking the Republican Party trend and create a lasting legacy.

The devastating drought we are experiencing in Oregon this year may be a result of global warming. At the very least, this is a vivid demonstration of what our future is predicted to look like if aggressive action is not taken to limit future climate change. In his four years in office, Smith has done nothing to address this problem. Ironically, Smith is failing on an issue that hits close to home. Many Oregonians are suffering during this drought, which is costing thousands their livelihoods.

In a recent report, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that climate change would lead to "decreased water availability for populations in many water scarce regions." The "Panel" is made up of 2000 of the world's top scientists from industry, non-profits, and government, and therefore represents a strong scientific consensus. A panel of researchers at the University of Washington has forecast a permanent 50% reduction in the snowpack in the Cascades. Warmer temperatures will result in increased evaporation from our soil. They conclude that these changes will sharply reduce summer stream flows and groundwater, with "enormous" impacts on irrigation, forestry, and electricity production.

The IPCC report explains how these changes appear to be
underway, and cites hundreds of scientific studies that have demonstrated so. This is where Oregon's yearlong drought comes in. While scientists can't prove (or disprove) that it was caused by global warming, it is apparently a demonstration of what is to come.

My choice of war as a metaphor is no coincidence. The predictions of global warming imply that, at the very least, millions of people will die as a result of climate change, much like the casualty numbers in World Wars I and II. The Red Cross has issued a warning that weather-related casualties are on the rise and global warming is likely to drastically aggravate the situation. Yet climate change is still treated as an "environmental issue", and those who are concerned are labeled environmentalists, not humanitarians.

Almost ten years ago, the US Senate acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, by ratifying the international Framework Convention on Climate Change. Yet, Smith has failed to support any substantive effort to implement that treaty, which, although non-binding, required that the United States attempt to hold its greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels. Since then, US emissions of the primary greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, have increased by 14%.

Monday, international negotiators agreed upon the final details of the Kyoto Protocol, a legally binding treaty that requires industrialized countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions. President Bush has called this treaty "unworkable" and claims that a better approach will be a non-binding treaty. His administration has put no alternative on the table, and will not present the treaty to the Senate for ratification. Furthermore, Bush has proposed an energy plan that would increase our supply of fossil fuels by another 30% in less than two decades.

After 10 years of non-progress on a non-binding treaty, it is time Senator Smith turned his attention away from his party affiliation in Washington D.C., and focused on the quality of life of Oregonians and their children. To prevent a century filled with summertime droughts and other impacts of global warming, it is time to re-prioritize our energy spending and take a second look at the Kyoto Protocol.

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