



**THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON  
ENERGY INDEPENDENCE AND GLOBAL WARMING**

**Opening Statement for Edward J. Markey (D-MA)  
"Healthy Planet, Healthy People: Global Warming and Public Health"  
Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming  
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Our planet is sick. As the planet's health deteriorates, our health will also be challenged in new ways. We have a choice: to take preventative medicine or to ignore the symptoms and suffer the consequences.

Today the Select Committee will examine the how the planet's aches and pains can influence our own health, and what we must do to save us both. The most direct effect of global warming in our country will be longer and hotter heatwaves. As we have seen in Chicago and other cities, the elderly suffer the most in heatwaves and are at greatest risk of dying.

But like any fever, the physical symptoms go beyond higher temperatures. Air quality also is affected by climate change. Hotter days will accelerate the reaction that creates ground level ozone. Ozone is a well established public health threat that can damage lung tissue and will increase the most in cities that already suffer from high pollution levels. Even modest exposure to ozone may encourage the development of asthma, especially in children

Warmer temperatures also mean plants will produce more ragweed and allergy-causing pollen. The allergy season will last longer as spring comes earlier and fall comes later, exposing already at risk populations to more and longer respiratory irritants.

Global warming will increase the United States vulnerability to infectious diseases. As the mercury rises in North America the warmer climate will encourage bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella* to multiply more rapidly, increasing our risk for water and food borne illness.

Higher temperatures also shift patterns of disease transmission. As North America warms, it will welcome a new range of illnesses. Already we have seen a lethal fungus once only found in the tropics take hold in the temperate rainforests of the Pacific North West.

The United Nations' IPCC predicts climate change to cause more extreme weather events, including flooding and drought. Floods and droughts both lead to additional human illness. Flooding can cause run-off and sewage overflow that contaminates drinking water with pollution and disease. Drought dehydrates the land, thus making it more difficult to quench our thirst with safe drinking water. Drought also increases the concentration of contaminants in water, thereby making it more difficult to purify.

Floods and droughts also promote the spread of infectious diseases by mice, rats and mosquitoes. The Hantavirus, a disease connected to large mice and rat populations which surge after droughts and flooding, was unknown before 1993 in the United States. It has now infected 465 people in the United States. An astounding 35% of these cases were lethal.

But warmer temperatures alone do not spread disease. Instead, climate change loads the dice by increasing the odds a disease will thrive in a new location once it is introduced. [SH: It is not obvious to me why that is so.] We are gambling with our health, and if we allow global warming to continue we are stacking the deck against ourselves.

The health impacts of global warming I just mentioned will not be shared equally. They will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable in our society – young children, the elderly, people in underserved communities and communities of color. While these citizens may suffer the most from the health consequences of climate change, they are historically the least responsible for the problem.

Within the United States there is a national consensus among public health professionals, academic researchers, and medical practitioners that climate change will negatively influence health. The consensus extends to our own Center for Disease Control whose Director, Dr. Julie Gerberding, testified in October 2007 that, "Climate change is anticipated to have a broad range of impacts on the health of Americans and the nation's public health infrastructure."

Thanks to an excellent public health care system, supported by the finest public health professionals in the world, the United States is better prepared to manage the health effects of climate change than many other nations. But even in the United States our ability to adapt is limited. If global warming continues unabated, we will constantly be reaching for our emergency kit of band-aids and pain killers that only relieve the symptoms without providing a lasting cure. This practice is not sustainable, and eventually the planet's fever will be out of our control.

But we are not paralyzed and unable to walk away from our current path. We must start the planet down the road to recovery by targeting the source of the problem, and reduce our levels of dangerous global warming pollution. This is the prescription that can heal the planet, and will be our best preventative medicine. We have one planet. We must work to save her as though our lives depend on it -- because they do.