FLOOR STATEMENT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Senator Al Franken

M. President, I rise today to talk about climate change. The recent extreme weather events we have experienced across the United States are a call to action. We in this body need to not just talk about climate change, but to take action to address it. If we fail to act, the extreme weather events we have seen will only grow more extreme in the future.

This winter has been exceptionally cold in many areas of the United States. Some deniers have taken this as a sign that climate change isn't happening. They have pointed to the cold winter as evidence that global warming is not occurring.

But they're missing the point. We already know that, on average, the earth is warming. This isn't complicated. We have been using thermometers to make measurements around the globe for a long time. And we know that average temperatures have gone up significantly in recent years.

But climate change isn't just about the average temperature. As the average temperature continues to rise, most experts agree that we will see ever more frequent extreme weather events—droughts, storms, floods, and other extreme events. It's important to remember that we're not attributing any one event to climate change. But we can say that there will be more extreme weather events as the earth grows warmer.

As you know, M. President, we've seen the Polar Vortex bring arctic weather to much of the United States during this winter. And according to White House science advisor Dr. John Holdren, we can expect to see more of this kind of extreme cold as global warming continues.

And this is going to have serious consequences. In my home state of Minnesota, the extreme cold has contributed to a very serious propane shortage. Many rural residents are unable to properly heat their homes. Turkey growers are finding it difficult to heat their barns. And, therefore, their turkeys. And this is not just a problem in Minnesota. Other areas of the country have also been affected. We in the Senate have to talk about what's happening and start taking action in the face of climate change threats.

The ongoing drought in California and other states is another example. The situation is particularly grave in California, where vast regions have been classified as D-4, which is the most severe drought category. This has cost farmers their crops and livestock and created severe water shortages for residents and businesses. Farmers have had to stop farming half a million acres of what is normally irrigated land. That is about 6 percent of the entire state of California. And according to the California Farm Water Coalition, it's already costing that state $5 billion. These costs get passed on to every American. As a result of this drought, Americans have paid more—and will continue to pay more—for groceries this winter.

Unfortunately, droughts like this are becoming commonplace. In 2012, a drought caused more than 70 percent of U.S. counties to be declared disaster areas. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimated that drought's economic impact to be $30 billion. The drought destroyed or damaged major crops all over this country, making corn and soybeans more expensive, and increasing animal feed costs. Again, Americans paid more for meats and other animal-based products.

In the Midwest, the 2012 drought dramatically lowered water levels on the Mississippi River, seriously interfering with our ability to transport our agricultural goods to market to compete with those from other countries. So that barges didn't run aground, shippers sent them down the Mississippi only half-full with, say, soybeans. This made our beans less competitive with Brazilian beans.

Climate change is also exacerbating our nation's wild fires. When Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell testified in 2012 before the Senate Energy Committee, I asked him about the link between climate change and forest fires. He told us that throughout the country we're seeing far longer fire seasons—more than two months longer compared to fire seasons in the 1970s. Wild fires are also larger and more intense. I asked Chief Tidwell whether scientists at the Forest Service thought that climate change was causing this increase in the size and intensity of wildfires and extending their season, and without hesitation, he said yes. The Forest Service is spending more and more fighting wild fires—now about half of its entire budget.

Longer fire seasons and larger, more intense fires are going to eat up more of that budget. In addition, these wildfires—especially ones that occur at the wildland-urban interface, are increasingly threatening homes and property. Most importantly, M. President, more intense fires are costing lives. The 19 brave firefighters who perished in Arizona last June should be a reminder of the gravity of this issue.

And, of course, M. President, we can't talk about climate change without talking about sea level rise. I serve on the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. In 2012, I attended a hearing on sea level rise and heard testimony about how rising sea level is increasing the size of flood zones and increasing damage from storm surges. At that hearing, we heard testimony about how rising sea levels are increasing the size of flood zones and increasing damage from storm surges. One of the witnesses told us that just a few extra inches of sea level rise could result in a storm surge that could flood the New York City subway system. It sounded like something out of science fiction.

Yet, six months later, that's exactly what happened when Hurricane Sandy hit New York City and flooded the subways. And my colleagues do not need to be reminded of the cost of Hurricane Sandy. It has cost taxpayers a staggering $60 billion.

So when people talk about the harmful consequences of climate change—and its costs in terms of homes, dollars, and lives—they are not talking about some far-off future problem. Climate change is already hurting us.

Unfortunately, M. President, only one of my colleagues from the other side of the aisle, the Ranking Member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Senator Murkowski from Alaska, attended that hearing. This has been pretty much the case whenever we have a hearing that even tangentially relates to climate change.

A number of my colleagues in Congress don't believe that human activities contribute to climate change. Many others, I suspect, don't talk about climate change because addressing it requires making some difficult choices.

This is despite the fact that even some of the major fossil fuel companies that previously funded anti-climate change efforts have turned the page on this issue. Exxon-Mobil used to fund the Heartland Institute, one of the leading organizations spreading climate change denial propaganda. But if you go to Exxon-Mobil's website today, it states—and I quote—"Rising greenhouse gas emissions pose significant risks to society and ecosystems." That's Exxon-Mobil.

Shell Oil states on its website—quote—"CO_2 emissions must be reduced to avoid serious climate change." That's Shell Oil.

So even the major oil and gas companies have begun to acknowledge that climate change is real. I would respectfully suggest that my colleagues on the other side of the aisle here in Congress also need to engage in a serious conversation on climate change.

At a time when Americans are dealing with record droughts and other extreme weather events, the Senate cannot afford simply to ignore climate change. And ultimately we have to come together to start addressing climate change before its damage and cost to society get out of control.

I know this isn't going to be easy, M. President. Some will point out that climate change is a global problem, and we can't solve it alone. And they are right. Emissions in the developing world are on the rise. China now surpasses the U.S. in total greenhouse gas emissions.

But China is also starting to wake up to its serious pollution problem. In fact, at the opening of the annual meeting of its Parliament last week, the Chinese Premier stated that his country is declaring war on pollution. Overcoming pollution challenges will require China to invest heavily in renewable and other environmental friendly technologies. And it is going to make the global clean energy race even more competitive. If we are going to win this race and create good paying jobs for Americans, we have to invest in clean energy.

And we know that government investment in energy can pay off. Take the example of natural gas. We are currently experiencing a natural gas boom in this country. Sometimes my colleagues forget that this boom happened in large part because of years of federal support to develop hydraulic fracturing technology. The Eastern Gas Shales Project was an initiative the federal government began back in 1976, before hydraulic fracturing was a mature industry. The Project set up and funded dozens of pilot demonstration projects with universities and private gas companies that tested drilling and fracturing methods. This investment by the federal government was instrumental in the development of the commercial extraction of natural gas from shale. In fact, micro-seismic imaging—a critical tool used in fracking—was originally developed by Sandia National Laboratory—a federal energy laboratory.

The industry was also supported through tax breaks and subsidies. In fact, Mitchell Energy Vice President, Dan Stewart, said in an interview that Mitchell Energy's first horizontal well was subsidized by the federal government. Mr. Mitchell said—and I quote—"DOE"—that's the Department of Energy—"started it, and other people took the ball and ran with it. You cannot diminish DOE's involvement."

So the basis of the natural gas revolution that is helping make America more energy independent can be traced back to federal research and federal support.

And in the same way, we have to support the renewable energy sector now. We have to be the ones who will develop these technologies and the ones who sell them to other nations. We need to lead the world in clean energy innovation.

At the moment, we're not doing enough. Last year, the Senate Energy Committee heard testimony regarding a report from the American Energy Innovation Council entitled "Catalyzing Ingenuity." The report, authored by Bill Gates, former Lockheed Martin CEO Norman Augustine, and other business leaders, states, and I quote, "the country has yet to embark on a clean energy innovation program commensurate with the scale of the national priorities that are at stake. In fact, rather than improve the country's energy innovation program and invest in strategic national interests, the current political environment is creating strong pressure to pull back from such efforts."

The report is a wake up call and it makes a convincing case for why government needs to support innovation in the energy sector.

Unfortunately, it's been difficult for Congress to pass comprehensive clean energy legislation – even though this is an essential prerequisite if we are going to win the global clean energy race. The good news, M. President, is that many individual states, which really are the laboratories of our democracy, have gone forward with their own clean energy programs.

As chair of the Energy Subcommittee on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I recently held a hearing on lessons from state energy programs. Among the innovative programs developed by many states are goals and mandates for renewable energy production as well as for increased energy efficiency of government and commercial buildings. M. President, did you know that over half of the states have Renewable Portfolio Standards? These standards are improving the air, creating jobs, and growing the economy.

My home state of Minnesota is one of the leaders in this area. We have a “25-by-25” renewable portfolio standard in place, which means that 25 percent of the state’s electricity must come from renewable sources by the year 2025. Xcel Energy, Minnesota’s largest utility, is following an even more ambitious plan of generating over 30 percent renewable energy by the year 2020, and they are on track to do that.

I believe the federal government should follow what the states are already doing and put a comprehensive and long-term clean energy plan in place.

One of the issues we discussed in my subcommittee was the upcoming EPA rules to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from existing coal-fired power plants. I know that a number of my colleagues are concerned about these regulations and have argued that they will increase the cost of electricity, especially in areas that are heavily dependent on coal. I understand these concerns and believe these regulations should be crafted using common sense. For example, if you give flexibility to states to implement these regulations, you can allow power plant operators to offset their emissions by investing in energy efficiency in homes and buildings. You'll get the same environmental result, at a lower cost to power plant owners. And just as important, you will unleash energy efficiency manufacturing and installation jobs throughout the economy. It will reduce our energy use, benefit the environment, and send a signal throughout the business sector that we are serious about deploying long-term energy efficient solutions. That's why Noresco, a major energy service company that testified at my hearing, was a strong proponent of this proposal.

In fact, we learned during my hearing that there was universal agreement among our witnesses—both Democrat and Republican witnesses—that giving states more flexibility to implement these regulations would be a good thing.

So when we talk about taking action on climate change, let's start with what we can all agree on. Let's do that stuff first.

M. President, the stakes are simply too high to ignore this issue. We can't leave it to future generations. Last year, my first grandchild was born. And I don't want to look back in 20 years and tell him that when we were in a position to do something about climate change, we chose not to because it involved some difficult choices. Because he is going to live through this century and into the next. Unless we act now, his generation will pay a very high price for our inaction. I don't want him to think of me, long after I'm gone, and ask why we didn't do anything to address climate change while we could.

So, M. President, I invite my colleagues from both sides of the aisle to join in this endeavor. We really owe it to the nation and to future generations.

Thank you, M. President. I yield the floor.