A Message from WHRC President Philip Duffy

Dear Friends,

Someone famous once said that willful ignorance sooner or later collides with physical reality. We're starting to see that with COVID-19 in the US, and I fear that the consequences will be tragic. As I watched the federal government's initial response to the virus—denial, minimization, blaming others, stifling and ignoring scientists, focusing on political ramifications, praising our inadequate response, undue concern for industrial profits—I could not help thinking that I've seen this movie before, in the government's response to climate change.

Both crises require science-based policies, including preparation based on mathematical modeling of future scenarios. Both crises require leadership. Both require international cooperation. Both require massive mobilization of public and private resources. In both cases, sacrifices now would prevent terrible suffering later.

Little of this is evident in our federal policies. In both cases, those policies seemed for too long to be driven more by politics than public good. As recently as three days ago Mike Pence said, "the risk is low", and Trump predicted that the pandemic will be better in a matter of weeks. Now I worry that we may lurch from inaction to a panicked and possibly ineffective over-reaction.

An important difference between these two crises is the time line. The cumulative effects of climate change will prove to be much more serious than those of COVID-19, but climate change develops over years and decades rather than days and weeks. COVID-19 will likely pass in a matter of months. When that happens, the climate crisis will still be with us. Will we learn any lessons from the epidemic? Will we apply them to how we manage climate change? Let's hope so. Maybe the main thing we could learn is that the unimaginable can happen. The fact that something has not occurred in our lifetimes doesn't make it impossible.

How is WHRC responding to the epidemic? First, we are doing everything possible to protect the health of our employees and to prevent the spread of the illness in our community. That includes requiring everyone to work remotely except by special permission, re-emphasizing the importance of basic hygiene, prohibiting all work-related travel. Our Facilities department is taking extra steps to disinfect our (nearly-empty) campus. We are also preparing for this to last a while. Our IT department is setting people up to work remotely, with VPN account, Zoom licenses, and so on. We're making plans for new employees who will start in the next month or two.

We are also continuing to advance our mission. Most of our work can be done very effectively via electronic communication, so impact on our mission will be limited. We are continuing to do nearly all of what we normally do in terms of research, communications, and working with our strategic partners. And there may be silver linings: based on a few days of remote work I am finding that I can be more productive when I don't have meetings all day long and don't travel half the time. Also, it's great to see more of my wife.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary public health emergency. But the very nature of an epidemic means that it will run its course, regardless of the wisdom or effectiveness of federal policies. "This too shall pass," and when it does climate change will still be the greatest challenge of this century. WHRC's goal in responding to this public health crisis is to ensure that we remain strong and effective in addressing the climate crisis!

We at WHRC are incredibly grateful for the commitment and ongoing support of our many friends and benefactors. It is particularly important in this time of uncertainty. Thank you for supporting us and our work, and stay safe!

Philip Duffy
President & Executive Director
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