

Opinion & Analysis

Devastating climate change not some far-off spectre



JOHN GIBBONS

The unstoppable process of climate change is under way and mitigation is the only option that remains

THEY SAY the only two things in life that are certain are death and taxes. We can now add a third item to that list: climate change.

Preventing climate change is now a physical impossibility, as the process is already under way. Think of it as a car crash viewed in slow motion. The best way of increasing our chances of getting out intact is to hit the brakes and reduce velocity; but we are also going to need seat belts and airbags, as some impact is inevitable.

This is known as climate adaptation, and it is, according to the Department of the Environment, "a fundamental element of the global response to climate change". In other words, we need to make serious and urgent, widescale preparations to collectively brace for climate impact.

The devastating floods this month have brought home to policymakers and the Irish public just how vulnerable we are to extreme weather events. It has also forced the issue of climate back on to the front pages, albeit at least until the flood waters subside. The Government has been spurred by these events to hasten the publication of its climate change adaptation strategy. This is now due out in the coming months.

Improving our flood defences is an urgent and obvious priority. For instance, flooding is

now regarded as Britain's single largest climate-related threat, with the annual cost of coping with floods expected to increase from its current £1bn (€1.26bn) a year to around £27bn (€34.15bn) annually by 2080.

However, areas as diverse as agriculture, transportation, water, energy policy and even health planning fall within the remit of this forthcoming strategy document. Mitigating the degree of overall warming that occurs as a result of climate change can really only be achieved at an EU and global level, so adaptation to cope with the domestic consequences of an increasingly unstable climate system is the priority for national administrations.

The spectrum of available adaptive responses can be broken into four key categories: technological (flood defences, engineering works etc.), managerial (such as altered farm or business practices), behavioural (where the public adjusts its choices to more climate-friendly options) and policy-based, which includes such steps as banning any building on natural flood plains.

Government sources are adamant that all the Coalition partners remain committed to keeping climate change as a top political priority. However, one of the central planks in Irish efforts to rein in our emissions was to be the introduction of a carbon levy. However,

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this now appears to have been long-fingered into 2010.

As the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change commissioned by the British government made clear, climate change is “the result of the greatest market failure the world has ever seen”. This is the failure to include the costs of climate change in market prices that guide economic behaviour. Low-cost flying is just one egregious example of what happens when we fail to apply the real costs to a pollution-intensive activity.

Valuing natural forests only based on the

price of timber, while failing to place a monetary value on the range of critical environmental services they provide is another example of false accounting arising from economic myopia. Or as Oscar Wilde put it, it's about knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.

While adaptation to the effects of climate change presents a massive challenge for national governments including our own in the years ahead, at an EU level, slowing down the runaway climate train remains the critical objective. “To ensure that global average temperature increases do not exceed pre-industrial levels by more than 2 degrees C”, according to the European Commission.

In its Programme for Government, the Coalition has adopted the EU position enthusiastically. While everyone agrees that we must hold the line at two degrees, worryingly, no one quite knows how. Earlier this month Prof Bob Watson, former chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, stated bluntly: “We don't know in detail how to limit greenhouse gas emissions to realise a two-degree target; we should be prepared to adapt to four degrees C.”

The problem, as Prof Watson himself knows well, is that a world beyond two degrees is a world incompatible with an abundant, prosperous humanity, not to

mention biodiversity. And while Irish politics grapple with adaptation to climate change, agriculture, one of the sectors most directly affected appears non-committal, at best.

The Irish Farmers Association's website totally ignores the reams of government, EU and IPCC publications on this critical issue. Instead, it quotes a solitary sceptic scientist from the University of Alabama who “questions the validity of future global warming trends and climate changes”.

When contacted to confirm whether this bizarre posting represented their actual position, an IFA spokesperson told me the website was “out of date” and issued a short statement indicating that the “IFA believes farmers can make significant contributions to reductions in emissions”. There was no further mention of the University of Alabama.

Meanwhile, the association points out the devastating consequences of the recent severe weather on the grain harvest. We can only hope that the IFA hierarchy has really moved from its sceptical position on climate change, given how it will impact more and more on Irish farmers' livelihoods in the years ahead.

In climate, as in farming, as we sow, so shall we reap.

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