

**Opening Statement of Chairman Sheldon Whitehouse**  
**Senate Committee on the Budget**  
**“Under the Weather: Diagnosing the Health Costs of Climate Change”**  
**April 26, 2023**

Ranking Member Grassley, members of the committee, witnesses, and guests, welcome to our seventh committee hearing. Today, we will continue our series on the economic costs of climate change, costs that are already affecting workers, families, and governments across the country. Today we explore the climate risks to public health and the associated economic and budgetary burdens.

As we’ve heard throughout this series, the climate crisis brings with it what witnesses have repeatedly called “systemic risks,” ones that cascade beyond a particular troubled sector to harm the entire economy and pose serious threats to the federal budget. Their warnings aren’t for future lawmakers; they’re for us, in this room, to protect against.

Healthcare costs related to combustion of fossil fuels are estimated to total nearly \$820 billion in the U.S. annually. Over the ten-year budget window, that’s over \$8 trillion. The direct costs of health care — doctor’s appointments, emergency room visits, rehabilitation and home health support, prescription drugs — strain the pocketbooks of American families. The indirect economic costs — from lost work and school days, reduced productivity, and increased economic instability — all add to that \$8 trillion burden.

If you care about deficits or economic growth, you have to care about climate change and its costs and risks. Yet with evidence of the economic dangers of climate change piling up around us, House Republicans propose eliminating clean energy tax credits and investments. They have completely lost their grip on reality, and are so subservient to their fossil fuel overlords that they’re willing to eliminate hundreds of thousands of clean energy jobs, cause trillions in climate harm, and shrink our economy by letting China build the technologies of tomorrow.

Their nonstarter of a plan would escalate carbon pollution, raising temperatures around the world. In Rhode Island in the last century, the average temperature is up three degrees. Rhode Island emergency rooms see a rise in hospital visits anytime there are multiple 80-plus-degree days in a row. On average there are 702 heat-related deaths and 67,512 emergency room visits each year in America due to heat. Extreme temperatures are more frequent and severe, and that costs lives and dollars. The Pacific Northwest’s deadly heatwave in 2021 saw approximately 600 additional deaths in one week in Oregon and Washington State. A heat wave of that intensity would have been virtually impossible without human-caused climate change.

Higher temperatures encourage smog formation and contribute to higher levels of airborne particulate matter and pollen. The combination of heat and poor air quality increases cardiovascular and respiratory risk, and the likelihood and severity of asthma attacks.

Warming climates expand disease vectors northward, particularly insects that carry diseases like Lyme disease, West Nile Virus, dengue fever, and Zika. More insects means more transmission,

and indeed there is evidence that climate shifts are the driving force behind more frequent disease outbreaks.

Climate upheaval brings more frequent and extreme weather events, which bring their own health care costs. The news reports regularly how hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and droughts lead to death, injury and illness. Hurricane Sandy is estimated to have cost \$3.3 billion in health costs—this included nearly 4700 emergency room visits, over 6600 hospital admissions, and 273 deaths.

The public health harms from climate change fall most heavily on the elderly, on children, on people of color, on the poor, and on people with preexisting conditions. Climate change is a multiplier both of illness rates and economic disparities. As a result, it will worsen economic inequality and widen gaps in health outcomes and life expectancy between poor and wealthy. Federal programs like Medicare and Medicaid will be heavily impacted given the populations they serve. In 2021, Medicare and Medicaid constituted almost 40% of all U.S. healthcare spending, and almost 20% of all federal spending.

Of course, these climate-related healthcare costs come on top of the many other climate costs we've heard about at previous hearings. Witnesses have warned us of risks that could take down the economy: the risk of a coastal property values crash; the risk of a similar wipeout in property values in wildfire country; the risk of insurance collapse as unpredictability drives insurers out of markets; the risk of the "carbon bubble" bursting in a disorderly transition from fossil fuel. These are not alternatives. They all could happen. We're playing with dangerous stakes. Deloitte has pegged the difference between getting climate right and getting it wrong at more than \$220 trillion. In a world in which those long-warned-of evils have come to pass, that \$8 trillion health cost burden will likely grow, as a crashed economy and budget will shrink. Not a good combination.

As this hearing will make clear, the effects of climate crisis on our nation's public health are dangerous and costly—to families, to businesses, and to the federal government. And this problem that will only get worse and more expensive unless we act now.