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A Crisis Demands Action

Vermonters have always rallied to protect and care for our friends and neighbors in a crisis. I am grateful for Governor Scott's calm and measured response when Vermont is in crisis. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Governor Scott followed the science and took the appropriate steps, despite considerable opposition, to keep Vermonters safe and to prevent a greater tragedy. Now, we need the same courage and focus as we grapple with flood recovery and take action to address the underlying forces of climate change that drove its severity.

So far this summer, Vermont has seen a record heat wave in May, the state's worst air quality in history in June, and recently a record rainstorm that dumped as much as two months of normal rain on towns around the state in just over a day.

And this is clearly the new normal for Vermont as the impacts of global warming hit us. Nolan Atkins, the former chair of the atmospheric sciences department at Vermont State University said: "In a warmer world and a warmer climate, [we should expect] these more frequent and more intense weather events,"

Yet despite the science, and clear evidence of increasingly severe weather, the Governor has vetoed every major piece of climate legislation the Vermont Legislature has put before him in recent years. We need Governor Scott to direct state agencies to recognize the climate emergency and treat climate action with the same emergency response and focus we are seeing right now during the floods, and that we did during Vermont's Covid response.

As the former co-chair of the Legislature's Climate Solution Caucus, I traveled throughout the state listening to Vermonters' concerns about the looming impacts of global warming and the urgent need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. I heard over and over that if we don't act on climate and curb our emissions we will run out of time; we will be too consumed by the effects of climate change to focus on transitioning to renewable energy.

I have seen our pragmatic Governor do a policy pivot when faced with an emergency. After the shooting threat in Fair Haven High School, he was a constructive and supportive partner for meaningful gun safety reforms.

It is time for the Governor to pivot on climate policy. There are a few simple things the Governor can do right now to make a difference and help Vermont be a leader in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. And more importantly, prevent greater tragedy.

First, the Governor should direct his appointees on the Climate Council to shift to an emergency response. The most immediate and constructive action he could take at this moment is to make sure Vermonters whose heating systems were destroyed in the flood are encouraged and incentivized to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy. Let's help provide loaner heating systems to get through the upcoming heating season and accelerate our investment in our green energy workforce. This will not only speed up Vermont's green energy transition but also create jobs; we can combat climate change and help Vermont's economy at the same time.

Second, direct his Agency of Natural Resources and Department of Public Service to become willing partners in implementing the Clean Heat Standard to help all Vermonters transition from fossil fuels for heating and cooling their homes and businesses. Over one-third of Vermont's greenhouse gas emissions come from heating and cooling our homes and businesses. Despite this, Governor Scott and his administration have inexplicably been an anchor in getting this groundbreaking initiative into action.

And third, support legislation to ensure Vermont gets 100% of its electricity from renewable energy by the end of the decade. With the passage of President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, wind and solar power are cheaper than ever and price competitive with new natural gas. Vermont needs to do its part to clean up its electric sector and end our environmentally unjust practice of importing our power from oil- and natural gas-burning plants in low-income communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

I'm not saying it's simple and easy, I understand firsthand the challenges rural Vermonters face in heating their homes and getting to work. But if we think transitioning to renewable heating and transportation is inconvenient or possibly a little more expensive, just look around at what we will be facing if we don't. Can we afford not to?

Sarah Copeland Hanzas was a Vermont House member for 18 years before being elected as Secretary of State in 2022. She lives in Bradford with her husband and has three adult children.

