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Cleveland Will See Increase in Heat Waves Risks

More Extremely Hot Days Projected with Global Warming

Cleveland, Ohio (August 25)--This morning, environmental and community advocates gathered in a cool location to discuss a hot topic. Together on the "green" rooftop of a downtown building, representatives of the National Wildlife Federation and others announced that Cleveland is on a list of the 30 cities believed to be most vulnerable to heat wave effects as the planet warms. According to a new report by the National Wildlife Federation and Physicians for Social Responsibility, Cleveland's relatively high level of vulnerable populations and low rates of air conditioning were among the reasons cited by the groups for its selection to the top 30 list.

"Many American cities are vulnerable to increased heat waves that will result from global climate change," said Tracy Sabetta of the National Wildlife Federation in Ohio. "People in poor health and the elderly often suffer the most, but everyone will feel the heat unless measures are taken to adequately prepare cities."

In a report being released today called, "*Heat Waves: Global Warming's Wake Up Call*," scientists have concluded that heat waves caused by global warming are going to bring significant challenges for American cities. The report's authors examined four major risk factors associated with heat-related mortality to identify 30 large cities in the United States that are especially vulnerable to heat waves based on current conditions. Factors considered included the average number of oppressively hot days each year, percentage of homes without central air conditioning, percentage of the city population living in poverty, and the quantity of ground-level ozone pollution.

Three Ohio cities appear on this list: Cincinnati, Toledo, and Cleveland. According to the report, 49 percent of the households in Cleveland are currently without central air conditioning and 30 percent of the population is living below the federal poverty level of \$16,530 for a family of three. That is more than double the national average.

As the United States warms another 4 to 11°F on average over the next century, we will have more extremely hot summer days. Every part of the country will be affected. Urban areas like Cleveland will feel the heat more acutely because asphalt, concrete, and other structures absorb and reradiate heat, causing temperature to be as much as 10°F higher than nearby rural areas.

"Cooler years like this one can set us up for trouble by making us complacent and less prepared for inevitably hot years to come," continued Sabetta. "And make no mistake -- the trends clearly show more hot years are on the way."

Cooler-than-average temperatures across the Midwest and Northeast over this past summer make it is easy to lose sight of the indisputable long-term warming trend. According to the most recent science on heat waves, the jet stream took an unusually southern track across the nation this summer, bringing more Arctic air and less tropical air to the Midwest and Northeast.

But while it may be cool in Cleveland, Ohio this summer, the planet as a whole is continuing to warm. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this July was the 5th warmest on record globally. Temperatures through July put 2009 at the 6th warmest year on record, tying 2004.

The increased air pollution that typically accompanies heat waves can especially harm children, who have a higher risk of developing asthma, have lungs that are still developing and growing, and have higher exposure because they breathe at a higher rate than adults and spend more time outdoors engaging in vigorous physical activity. Historically, about 20 to 28 percent of weather-related deaths have been due to heat, more than any other single weather-related cause.

“Through our programs that focus on the environmental health concerns of children and the elderly living in poor neighborhoods, we at Environmental Health Watch are all too aware of the health consequences of more frequent extreme heat events and increased air pollution associated with global warming,” said Stuart Greenburg, Executive Director of Environmental Health Watch. “Our focus in the fight to reduce greenhouse gases is on the housing sector, which accounts for 24 percent of carbon emissions. We need widespread home weatherization to reduce carbon emissions, increase comfort and health, and make housing more affordable.”

Residents of all Ohio cities can begin to prepare for hotter temperatures by reducing climate change pollution that is heating the planet while taking steps to cool our cities and boost public health response systems.

“Our nation's environmental challenges are inherently tied to the economic needs of our most vulnerable communities,” said Shanelle Smith, Ohio Organizer for the Apollo Alliance. “This report makes it clear that if we want to have a sustainable environment and put people back to work, we must invest in clean energy. Investing in the clean energy economy will reduce the impact of pollution on our climate and create good green jobs in the process.”

“If we are to prevent crossing critical tipping points such as the melting of all arctic permafrost which will cause the release of huge amounts of methane into our atmosphere, we must act now,” said Dr. Eric Schreiber, speaker for the Climate Project. “The task falls to us. Those who came before us did not understand the need to act. Those who come after us will be powerless to prevent the crippling and deadly effects of climate destabilization. Future generations will judge us by our willingness to make the tough decisions.”

We can reduce the severity of heat waves and their impacts on vulnerable populations. Curbing global climate change pollution as much and as quickly as possible is an essential first step. Legislation recently passed by the US House and currently being considered in the Senate will reduce carbon emissions and move us toward a clean energy economy. Shifting to clean solar energy is an especially promising option because sunlight is plentiful during heat waves, when electricity demand for air conditioning peaks.

At the same time, we must make our cities cooler and greener, for example by introducing more green space—parks, trees, and “green, reflective roofs” —to greatly reduce the urban heat island effect. Furthermore, cities must implement public health measures—such as heat watch and warning systems, public cooling places, and assistance to low-income residents for home improvements that make buildings cooler—to reduce the impact of extreme heat that we cannot avoid.