PUBLIC OPINION: Most Americans fail to link health impacts to climate change, poll shows  (Thursday, June 12, 2014)

Umair Irfan, E&E reporter

In the lead-up to the carbon dioxide restrictions on existing power plants announced last week, the White House leaned strongly on health issues as an argument for mitigating climate change.

The National Climate Assessment, released in May, concluded that climate change is already having detrimental effects on the medical sector as infectious diseases spread, heat waves proliferate and allergies intensify across the United States (ClimateWire, May 7).

President Obama himself argued that the particles and pollutants that harm breathing in the short term come from the same sources that warm the planet over the long term. Reducing carbon emissions from power plants under Section 111(d) of the Clean Air Act would therefore address both problems (ClimateWire, June 3).

The tack is a pre-emptive rebuttal to arguments that mitigating climate change is too esoteric to understand and too economically devastating to address. On the contrary, the administration said global warming is clear and present danger to health and solving it will save billions of dollars.

However, recent polling shows most Americans don't make connections between higher average temperatures and risks like spreading dengue vectors or longer allergy seasons.

The Climate Change in the American Mind survey last week found that most Americans said they don't know or drastically underestimated the health impacts from the warming planet. Researchers asked 1,014 adults about their understanding of climate change-related issues, including health.

40% don't know

According to the report, produced by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, roughly 4 in 10 Americans said "I don't know" when asked how many people die or fall ill due to global warming. Another 4 in 10 proffered estimates that fell short by an order of magnitude or more.

Researchers asked about both current risks and potential harm 50 years in the future and found that the pattern remained consistent. About 2 out of 10 people gave answers within the correct range, researchers reported.

"Overall, the vast majority of Americans simply do not connect the dots," said Anthony Leiserowitz, one of the investigators for the study and director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.

This comes despite the growing body of evidence from public health officials and agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warning that injury risks from flooding, drought and heat waves alongside health problems stemming from spreading disease vectors are poised to grow due to climate change (ClimateWire, April 4).

During a free-association exercise, Leiserowitz said, respondents rarely mentioned medical problems among the words
that came to mind when asked about climate change. "In all the years we've been asking this question, almost no one associated global warming with any impacts on human health," he said.

Nonetheless, the health argument for mitigating climate change may still be the strongest, transcending partisan divides.

**How to align public opinion with science?**

"There is no lobby in the United States that is anti-health," Leiserowitz said, observing that the legal basis for curbing greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act centers on protecting public health.

"I think it's actually a very good communication strategy the president has been using," added Edward Maibach, another investigator and director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University. "Our research shows that members of the public across the political spectrum, liberals and conservatives, understand there are health benefits associated with cleaning up our fuel supplies."

He noted that many public health officials are already contending with problems like dengue epidemics and heat-related mortality at smaller scales, but many lack the resources necessary to inform people about the emerging danger and the precautions available.

The question, then, is how to sway public opinion. "We learn about risk from personal experience only when the direct consequences are clear and immediate," Maibach said. "When the public learns about environmental risks in general, they tend to learn about it through the news media."

Citing the health campaign against smoking, Maibach said the process is incremental and takes years, facing industry resistance against mounting evidence. In addition, doctors and health officials will have to add their voices to the chorus of scientists warning about climate risks before more people understand how they connect to health.

The investigators said they are now working with professional medical organizations to figure out how well they understand the links between climate change and health.

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