CLIMATE CHANGE REQUIRES POLITICAL WILL, ACTIVIST SAYS

By Tim Johnson
Free Press Staff Writer
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Scientists have spoken on global warming, but the window of opportunity for action is closing fast, and it will take a mass political movement -- something like the civil rights movement -- to avert catastrophe.

So said author and environmental activist Bill McKibben in a talk at Champlain College on Monday afternoon. The difference with the civil rights movement, he said, was that leaders of that knew they would eventually win. By contrast, there’s no assurance that the movement to avert disastrous climate change will prevail.

Only a few years remain to make a difference, he said. He pointed to some positive signs: The national awareness of the problem is rising, and the “Step it Up” campaign, which generated more than 1,000 demonstrations across the country last year, set a useful precedent. The necessary changes are huge, but they have to be made rapidly, he said.

“We have to stop building coal-fired power plants. We have to phase out coal over the next 20 years, not develop oil from shale and tar sands,” he said. That’s just for starters. When asked for one thing an individual could do, he replied: “Politically organize.”

McKibben’s remarks were Champlain College’s keynote to “Focus the Nation,” a week of activities on campuses across the country designed to take on the challenge of climate change.

The University of Vermont kicked off its program with a panel discussion of carbon trading -- an enterprise that some in the environmental movement see as an answer to the question of how to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

Introducing the panel, forestry specialist William Keeton of UVM’s Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources cautioned the audience of about 60 that carbon trading “is not a silver bullet” in addressing climate change.
Two panelists from the United Kingdom took sharp issue with both forms of carbon trading. The problem with the cap-and-trade system in Europe, said Larry Lohmann of The Corner House, an environmental advocacy group, is that it hasn't worked. Major polluters have used their political clout to get their caps raised, he said, and they've been able to exceed their limits by buying offset credits of dubious environmental value. An example of the latter might be a hydroelectric project in India that inundates traditional, low-emitting farming communities and is then counted as an offset for pollution in an industrialized country.

An offset is just what it sounds like, Jutta Kill of the United Kingdom's SinkWatch reminded the audience: It's compensatory, but it does nothing to reduce overall emissions. More likely, she said, it can be used as an excuse for someone to produce even more emissions.

Much more effective, she said, would be to stop subsidizing fossil-fuel industries and shift that money to renewable and decentralized energy projects.

Another panelist, Secretary of Natural Resources George Crombie, suggested that the efficacy of a carbon-trading system "is only as good as its design."

One of the few upbeat thoughts came from UVM economist Josh Farley, toward the end. He pointed out that the country could cut its energy use and its emissions by a third and still leave people with the same living standard that Americans enjoyed in 1969, when the poverty rate was even lower than today.

Contact Tim Johnson at 660-1808 or tjohnson@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com