

# Opinion: We must be aware of planet's plight

By Conrad Anker

Ten years ago, the percentage of Americans who believed in anthropogenic global warming stood at 75 percent. Fast-forward a decade to 2011 and the number dropped to 44 percent. Has the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere decreased 31 percent in 10 years? The poll, conducted by Harris Interactive, is indicative of the battle being waged over climate change.

Lee Atwater, Republican strategist, coined the phrase, "Perception is reality." We believe what is comforting. While soothing, it might not necessarily be factual. Build into this the persuasive power of advertising, and it is easy to understand why climate change and the related facts are less important to citizens of the United States. Where, as perception can vary according to one's views, certain empirical measurements, based on the principle of scientific observation, are fact.

Drought, by any measure, isn't fun. While we enjoyed a robust winter in southwest Montana last year, the paucity of snow is this winter's opening line to many conversations. While low snow affects winter recreation, the greater concern is water available for domestic and agricultural needs. The intense two-week cold snap, a signature Montana event straight out of an Ivan Doig novel with 40-below temperatures, has not been part of the current winter. The ease of not having to warm up the car and being able to maintain comfort in the house with a lower energy bill are obvious benefits. The same ease also benefits the pine bark beetle. The colder temperatures needed to keep the bugs at bay are absent. For the regional forests this translates into more standing dead timber, which coupled with a dry summer, equates to a greater risk of wildfire.

On a global level, 2011 was the 10th warmest year on record and saw an unprecedented level of extreme weather events. From the flooding in Australia, Thailand and Mississippi, to the heat waves in Russia and Texas, to the devastation of Hurricane Irene in New England and southern Canada, climate chaos has created a fair amount of hardship and in turn economic duress. The general warming trend has continued unabated. Thirteen of the warmest years since 1880 have occurred in the past 15 years. The World Meteorological Organization will publish the final figures for 2011 weather events in the coming weeks.

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