

Opinion: When climate, population and food collide

By Jeff Baldwin and Asher Sheppard, Santa Rosa Press Democrat

Human population is often overlooked when we think about climate change. Yes, industrialization brings the greenhouse gases now warming the Earth, but it also affects world population, the proportions of young and old, where people live, what they consume and how their food is grown. Today, technology-intensive industrial agriculture is producing the food for many of Earth's billions.

The link between industrialization and climate change is well known. The shift from muscle power to energy from combustion of fossil fuels releases vast amounts of carbon that living organisms took from the atmosphere hundreds of millions of years ago. Energy stored in the coal, oil and gas of Earth's crust powers large-scale industrialization, while the accompanying greenhouse gas emissions warm Earth's climate.

The relationship between industrialization and demographic changes in the developed world is less widely known. As Western Europe, North America and Japan industrialized, farmers were pushed off their lands and moved to cities. Large families became problematic, particularly with the passage of child labor laws and as women went to work outside the home. Education and the ability to control fertility have combined with these societal changes to cut fertility rates markedly in the developed world.

Yet in many developing countries today, women commonly have more than five children. Many of these will be among the 2 billion additional people at the global dinner table by mid-century – most too poor to buy enough food should prices rise.

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