

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

In America's Heartland, Discussing Climate Change Without Saying 'Climate Change'

By HIROKO TABUCHI JAN. 28, 2017

GLEN ELDER, Kan. — Doug Palen, a fourth-generation grain farmer on Kansas' wind-swept plains, is in the business of understanding the climate. Since 2012, he has choked through the harshest drought to hit the Great Plains in a century, punctuated by freakish snowstorms and suffocating gales of dust. His planting season starts earlier in the spring and pushes deeper into winter.

To adapt, he has embraced an environmentally conscious way of farming that guards against soil erosion and conserves precious water. He can talk for hours about carbon sequestration — the trapping of global-warming-causing gases in plant life and in the soil — or the science of the beneficial microbes that enrich his land.

In short, he is a climate change realist. Just don't expect him to utter the words "climate change."

"If politicians want to exhaust themselves debating the climate, that's their choice," Mr. Palen said, walking through fields of freshly planted winter wheat. "I have a farm to run."

Here in north-central Kansas, America's breadbasket and conservative heartland,

the economic realities of agriculture make climate change a critical business issue. At the same time, politics and social pressure make frank discussion complicated. This is wheat country, and Donald J. Trump country, and though the weather is acting up, the conservative orthodoxy maintains that the science isn't settled.

So while climate change is part of daily conversation, it gets disguised as something else.

“People are all talking about it, without talking about it,” said Miriam Horn, the author of a recent book on conservative Americans and the environment, “**Rancher, Farmer, Fisherman.**” “It's become such a charged topic that there's a navigation people do.”

Mr. Palen — he plays his politics close to his vest but allows that he didn't vote for Hillary Clinton — and others here in Glen Elder and across the state illustrate the delicate dance.

Farmers like him focus on practical issues like erosion or dwindling aquifers. “When you don't get the rainfall, it's tough times,” he said.

Regional politicians and business leaders speak of pursuing jobs that clean energy may create, rather than pressing the need to rein in carbon emissions. A science teacher at a community college — whose deeply religious students sometimes express doubts about the trustworthiness of science that contradicts biblical teachings — speaks to his class about the positives of scientific discovery (electricity) in order to ease into more contentious subjects (global warming).

And an editor for a closely followed agriculture magazine, *Successful Farming*, recently made a controversial move, drawing a flurry of angry letters: He broke with longstanding policy to address climate change head-on.

“Some readers thanked us,” the editor Gil Gullickson said. “But some wondered whether we'd been hijacked by avid environmentalists.”

The climate has not always been such a partisan issue. Richard Nixon, a

Republican president, set up the Environmental Protection Agency and signed the Clean Air Act. Ronald Reagan ushered in the Montreal Protocol, the first global treaty to protect the global atmosphere.

Much of that consensus has broken down, in no small part because of a well-financed push by fossil-fuel interests, together with influential Republican allies, to attack well-established research on topics like global warming and push back on environmental regulation. That push began in earnest during the George W. Bush administration as attempts to undercut the Clean Air Act, and since then, the divide has widened.

President Trump has famously said he believes that climate change is a hoax invented by the Chinese, and his administration has purged nearly all mention of climate-change programs from the White House and State Department websites. It has also ordered a freeze on federal grant spending at the E.P.A. and other government agencies.

The fact that the climate-change discourse has also become dominated by liberals has alienated some conservatives, including Mr. Palen. Many people here in particular resent how, in the polarized political landscape of recent years, conservative Americans have been painted as hostile to the environment.

The Trump campaign successfully seized on that schism, painting Democrats as overzealous environmentalists with little sympathy for the economic realities or social mores of rural America. “Many of our federal environmental laws are being used to oppress farmers instead of actually helping the environment,” Mr. Trump quipped in a widely circulated Q. and A. on FarmFutures.com. “Farmers care more for the environment than the radical environmentalists.”

Still, “it would be a huge mistake to think people voting for Trump were voting against the environment,” Ms. Horn said. If Trump follows an aggressive anti-environment agenda, she said, “there will be a big backlash in the heartland.”

Defender of the Soil

In many ways, Mr. Palen sees himself as the ultimate conservationist. His great-grandfather, the son of an immigrant from Luxembourg, was the first to farm in this stretch of north-central Kansas.

Mr. Palen grew up on the farm, took it over in his 20s, and looked to make his mark. In college, he learned of a farming technique called “no till,” which is intended to more closely mimic the natural prairie ecosystem, and was intrigued by its promise to protect his family fields from Kansas’ relentless winds and sudden downpours. The idea behind no-till farming, he now explains to anyone who will listen, is that plowing the soil destroys its natural structure, causing it to lose its precious moisture and nutrients. That makes it vulnerable to erosion.

Mr. Palen’s fields aren’t tilled. There are no neat furrows. The residue of plants from previous plantings still carpets the earth, offering a layer of protection, and his fields are never bare even after harvest. He alternates wheat and other crops with what he describes as a cocktail of grasses and leafy plants, like grain sorghum, sunflowers and alfalfa, a gesture toward the diversity of the wild prairie. “They say there’s more organisms in a handful of soil than people on the planet,” Mr. Palen said, making his way through a field between plantings. He stooped his tall frame down, dug up a clump of earth, and rolled it between his fingers. He is soft-spoken, yet when he talks of the earth, his excitement is obvious.

“See how it’s firm and holds together?” he said. “See how it doesn’t break down into goo?”

No-till farming addresses a dire problem facing American farmers: Almost 1.7 billion tons of topsoil are blown or washed off croplands a year, according to the Department of Agriculture, resulting in billions of dollars in losses for farmers. Keeping the soil healthy and covered also reduces evaporation by 80 percent, helping farmers conserve water, the department estimates.

Farmers like Mr. Palen also happen to be protecting a vast and valuable carbon sink, making him an ally to climate-change campaigners. The soil traps far more carbon in its depths than all plant and animal life on the earth’s surface,

scientists estimate. A 2013 study estimated that no-till and other restorative farming methods could achieve up to 15 percent of the total carbon reduction needed to stabilize the climate.

Despite his conservationist streak, Mr. Palen has no affinity for environmentalists. He feels vilified, he says, for his continued use of chemical herbicides and pesticides. (Some organic farmers control weeds by tilling the soil, which Mr. Palen argues causes more ecological harm.) And he remains suspicious of any expansion of government regulations that ignore realities of rural America.

“We want to be left alone,” Mr. Palen said. He singled out the Clean Water Rule, an E.P.A. regulation designed to protect streams and other waterways, as regulatory overreach. Washington types wanted to dictate what he could do with every creek, every puddle, on his farm, he said, putting impossible burdens on farmers.

And most of them had probably never spent any time on a farm, he said. “We’re the ones working to protect the environment. We’re the ones whose lives are tied to the earth.”

Honing Scientific Strategy

Carl Priesendorf, a science teacher at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, Mo., has learned strategies to talk about climate change without completely alienating climate skeptics. He teaches geology and meteorology. Those subjects would usually be innocuous, but not here.

“I’d show the CO₂ data — how we’d had the hottest year on record,” Mr. Priesendorf said. “But I get students who basically say what I’m teaching is nonsense. My car’s been keyed. I get notes from students saying they’re praying for my soul.” One such note that he shared reads, “Know that God’s love surpasses knowledge.”

Since a particularly contentious debate in class — a student threw a book bag

at him, he said — Mr. Priesendorf has taken a step back to focus on the everyday positives of science. “I ask: ‘Do you like the light bulb? Do you like electricity?’ That’s science,” he said. “Then I ease into more contentious topics, like climate change.”

That is an uphill battle. A 2013 survey found that just 8 percent of farmers in the Midwest believed that “climate change is occurring, and it is caused mostly by human activities.” An earlier Pew Research Center poll found that only 48 percent of people in the Midwest agree with the statement that there is “solid evidence that the average temperature on earth has been getting warmer,” a number below other regions in the country.

And conservatives have been pushing back against classroom standards adopted by the state of Kansas that treat evolution and climate change as scientific concepts. Last year, the United States Supreme Court declined to review a nonprofit group’s lawsuit that claimed that those standards promote atheism.

But now, under a Trump administration, Mr. Priesendorf felt science itself was under fire. “If even your government starts telling your country that scientists are lying to you, it’ll be even tougher for science teachers,” he said. “I’m going to focus on keeping my students’ minds open to the possibility that the science is correct.”

Lawmaker Forges Alliances

Annie Kuether, a Democrat and clean-energy advocate in the Republican-controlled Statehouse and a member of the State Utilities Committee, has for years pushed for more renewable energy. One obstacle, though, is that the committee’s chairman does not believe in climate change.

A St. Louis native who landed in Topeka as a young bride four decades ago, Ms. Kuether is used to working alongside adversaries. Her county voted for Mr. Trump, along with all but two counties in the state.

She has sat through committee meetings where climate skeptics, including the

discredited scientist Wei-Hock Soon, blasted the science behind global warming. “Carbon Dioxide, CO₂, is merely a bit player in climate change,” reads one slide Mr. Soon presented in 2013. “Rising CO₂ is largely beneficial to plant and human life.”

“I remember being horrified,” Ms. Kuether said.

Still, over the years, she has forged powerful business alliances by focusing, in her arguments, on jobs and the economy. She has also found increasing support from farmers and landowners who count on wind turbines and solar panels they host on their property for income.

“Gradually, from a political standpoint, you can build a constituency that benefits from this industry,” said Mark Lawlor, one ally and an executive at Clean Line Energy Partners, which is building a 780-mile transmission line to deliver 4,000 megawatts of wind power from western Kansas to Missouri, Illinois and other neighboring states.

“Just like grain, cattle, airplanes, wind’s another valuable resource Kansas can export,” he said, referring to Kansas’ sizable agricultural industry, as well as the Cessna Aircraft Company, which is based in Wichita, Kan. “Kansas has a lot of pragmatic folks here, and we recognize benefits.”

Kansas’ dwindling water sources have been another issue that Ms. Kuether has found strikes a nerve among voters here, whatever their beliefs on climate change. That has helped to build some support for measures to save the state’s shrinking aquifers, a lifeline for communities in western Kansas, though not yet any decisive action.

In fact, her focus on the practical is a big part of what has kept getting her elected, she said, in a State Legislature where she is outnumbered by Republican lawmakers, two to one. “I’ve always felt that families have always been concerned about water — whether they’re Democratic, Republican or independent,” she said.

Publication Takes a Stand

Mr. Gullickson of *Successful Farming*, who usually writes about topics like pigweed, gypsum and runoff, has started to push the envelope on debates over climate change. An 11-year veteran of the magazine, where he is the crops technology editor, Mr. Gullickson said he had long been on the fence about climate change. But that began changing five years ago, when he attended a workshop where a University of Kentucky professor gave a convincing argument, backed by data.

“I started looking at the evidence, at the data and what farmers were doing,” he said. “And it’s clear: The weather has become more extreme these days. And I thought, ‘I’ve never heard of any successful business publication that stayed in business by withholding information.’”

So for the first time in the storied magazine’s 115-year-old history, a cover story squarely addressed the science of climate change. The October 2014 piece was published under the headline, “@#*\$% Weather!”

“I know what you’re thinking: Climate change is just some figment of Al Gore’s imagination adopted by liberal tree-huggers who want to tank the U.S. economy,” Mr. Gullickson wrote.

“Still, think back over some rough weather you’ve endured in recent years and ask yourself these questions,” he continued. “Are springs getting wetter? Are droughts increasing in severity? Are rainstorms increasing in intensity?” The clear answer, he said: “Yes.”

Mr. Gullickson said that he and his editor had held lengthy discussions leading up to the article’s publication. His editor in chief, Dave Kurns, was supportive, he said, but also warned that the piece could generate backlash.

Mr. Kurns spoke candidly over concerns of a backlash in an editor’s note that led the issue. When he became the magazine’s editor two years earlier, he said, he had been warned, “Never use the words ‘climate change.’”

“I was told: ‘Readers hate that phrase. Just talk about the weather,’” he wrote.

The industry publication, which has a circulation of 390,000, was influenced by some of the biggest names in agriculture taking a stand on the issue, Mr. Gullickson said. The agricultural giant Cargill has started to lobby members of Congress and urged farmers to take climate change seriously, saying inaction would be detrimental to the United States economy.

The response to the magazine's take on the issues has been split.

"When you start quoting 'climate scientists' and the United Nations," wrote in one reader, Bill Clinger, a farmer based in Harpster, Ohio, "you are as nutty as Al Gore." Measures to control emissions, he said, "are just seductive names for socialist programs intended to micromanage people and businesses."

Mr. Gullickson said some readers thanked him. "Finally, a farming magazine comes to terms with what is going on with the weather," wrote Paul Jereczek of Dodge, Wis.

Reached by phone, Mr. Jereczek, who runs a dairy farm, expressed exasperation at people's inability to speak openly. "The phrase has become so politicized, it's just hard to talk about," he said. "But we talk about everything else. Even round here, protecting soil is such a hot topic right now. But we talk about the soil, saving fertilizer, that sort of thing."

Grouse to the Rescue

Mark Salvo, vice president at the wildlife conservation group Defenders of Wildlife, might be a walking, talking stereotype of the kind of environmentalist who so frustrates Mr. Palen. An Oregonian now based in Washington, he spent 15 years in the American West fighting to conserve fish and wildlife on public lands.

But Mr. Salvo thinks he knows an unlikely — and highly sympathetic — character to bring Kansans and others together around climate change: the lesser prairie-chicken.

Known for its shock of yellow hair and bright orange cheeks, the lesser prairie-

chicken once roamed the Great Plains. Today, though, the grouse is under threat — its populations reduced to isolated pockets in western Kansas, Colorado and the Texas-New Mexico border as its habitat succumbs to climate-induced drought, farming, drilling and other human activity.

The group has been petitioning the Fish and Wildlife Service to relist the lesser prairie-chicken as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The bird found itself taken off the list after a lawsuit in 2014 backed by the oil and gas industry, which argues that any protective measures would mean added costs for energy developers.

Mr. Salvo has found that to gain allies it doesn't always help to start with the role climate change plays in harming the bird's habitat. Instead, his movement has tried to find common ground, highlighting the historical heritage of the lesser prairie-chicken. In the "Little House on the Prairie" novels, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote about eating prairie-chicken mush.

Mr. Salvo also stresses how grouse-friendly practices can be good for farming, too, backing a federal program that provides financial aid to private landowners who adopt those practices. Leaving corn stubble standing after harvest gives the birds food and places to hide, for example, while also helping farmers protect the soil.

"Sometimes, to gain allies, it helps to focus on issues of common concern, to support local economic development as well as species conservation," he said. "It helps everybody come to the table."

Last week, Mr. Palen, the farmer, was again talking weather — if not climate change — at a conference of no-till farmers in Salina, Kan. Sessions included "Using Your Water Efficiently," "Making Weather Work for You in 2017" and "Building Healthy Soil With Mob Grazing," a practice that helps to fertilize the land.

And yes, Mr. Palen says, he is on board with saving the lesser prairie-chicken. "I often think of ways I can protect their habitat," he said. "I enjoy wildlife."

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