



CLIMATE READY MISSOULA: BUILDING RESILIENCY IN MISSOULA COUNTY

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CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS US DAILY.

LET'S GET

CLIMATE READY, MISSOULA.

CLIMATE READY MISSOULA: BUILDING RESILIENCY IN MISSOULA COUNTY

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Foreword

Welcome to Climate Ready Missoula.

This plan has been nearly two years in the making, and we are so grateful to the hundreds of Missoula County residents, businesses, and organizations that have contributed to it, and to the Steering Committee and plan authors who worked so hard to see it to completion. The climate crisis is daunting, but if this planning process is any indication, Missoula County residents have the commitment, smarts, and creativity to take it on.

A few weeks before this plan was scheduled to be adopted by Missoula County and the City of Missoula, we were confronted by another crisis: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). As we write this, we are in the midst of this public health crisis, and the primary focus of our local governments – and, indeed, of governments at all levels – is protecting all citizens, and especially the most vulnerable among us, from the health impacts of the virus and the economic impacts of the associated job losses and business closures.

But while our attention is on COVID-19, we have not lost sight of the urgency of addressing the climate crisis. If anything, the current situation brings into sharper focus the need to increase our community's resiliency. And these two crises are likely to intersect in complex ways.

For example, Missoula County's health and emergency response systems are currently working at full capacity to respond to COVID-19 and are doing an incredible job. As the Climate Ready Missoula plan describes, we can expect increasing pressure on our emergency responders, public health professionals, and healthcare providers in the coming years due to more frequent flooding and longer wildfire (and wildfire smoke) seasons associated with climate change. In the very near term, we may face these crises while we are still dealing with COVID-19, presenting numerous challenges. For example, the logistics of wildland firefighting do not easily accommodate social distancing, and the consequences of a COVID-19 outbreak in a fire camp could be severe.

Another particularly worrying possibility is the combination of the virus and wildfire smoke. As described in this plan, wildfire smoke contributes to a wide range of negative health outcomes including

respiratory and cardiovascular disease. And as a respiratory illness, COVID-19 is exacerbated by poor air quality. Studies have found that COVID-19 patients who live in regions with poor air quality are more likely to die from the virus than patients who live in regions with cleaner air. The Climate Ready Missoula plan includes strategies to provide clean indoor air during periods of wildfire smoke; these strategies should be prioritized and accelerated in the context of COVID-19.

These are dark days, but there are also reasons for hope. For example, economic stimulus programs will be necessary to restart the economy following COVID-19, and there are tremendous opportunities for such programs to help build local resiliency through job-creating investments in energy efficiency retrofits, green infrastructure, public transit, clean energy, and other strategies identified in this plan. Such investments would rebuild our economy from the ravages of the current crisis while building our resiliency for the future.

As the current crisis unfolds day by day, its long-term implications are as yet unknown. However, several lessons are beginning to emerge that can inform the implementation of the Climate Ready Missoula plan.

- 1) Social Solidarity.** COVID-19 shines a bright light on our interconnectedness. The only way to slow the virus's spread is for all of us to do our part to comply with social distancing guidelines (or, as it's sometimes termed, "physical distancing for social solidarity"). We depend on one another. That's true within our community, and it's also true at a global scale. And it applies equally to the climate crisis.
- 2) Equity.** Both COVID-19 and climate change disproportionately impact the most vulnerable among us, including those with limited financial resources. In the immediate term, we have an obligation to help those who need it most. In the longer-term, the more equitable our community, the more resilient we will be.
- 3) Science.** COVID-19 is a stark reminder that when scientists warn of an impending crisis, we should take heed. As the first sentence of the Climate Ready Missoula Plan states, "There is overwhelming scientific consensus that our climate is changing, and that urgent action is required to avert a potentially catastrophic outcome." Denying science is a poor survival strategy.

4) Resolve. A few weeks ago, the concept of closing all schools and nonessential businesses would have been unthinkable. While we all look forward to the day when these measures are no longer needed, there's an important lesson to be learned here: in the face of a crisis, we have the ability as a society to step up and do what needs to be done. We must bring this level of resolve to addressing the climate crisis as well.

5) Urgency. In the case of COVID-19, it appears that the earlier social distancing measures are enacted in a community, the more lives can be saved. Wait too long to act, and the crisis spirals out of control. The same is true of climate change. The longer we wait, the more overwhelming the problem becomes and the more difficult and expensive it will be to address it.

When we started the Climate Ready Missoula planning process, we could not have imagined the circumstances under which we would adopt this plan. But we're under no illusion that COVID-19 will be the last unexpected crisis we will face as a community. That's why one of the guiding principles of this plan is "innovate and adapt," including "build capacity to respond to the unexpected." In the end, perhaps, there's never been a better time to adopt and implement Climate Ready Missoula. The need to build our resiliency has never been clearer. Together, we can do this.

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