
A fine summer

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Climate change represents one of our greatest health challenges. In the face of this, the last thing we need are our own fantasy realities and preposterous conspiracy theories.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

'I think we are lucky to have had such a fine summer this year,' said Kari Kjønaas Kjos, Member of Parliament for the Norwegian government's Progress Party, in a statement to the Aftenposten daily on 28 July (1). She does not believe in anthropogenic climate change, and part of her justification for this belief is the fact that there was a considerable amount of rainfall last summer (1).

This year, the summer has indeed been fine – for most of us. But something is amiss – very amiss, in fact. The driest summer for 117 years has resulted in a dramatic reduction in Norway's grain harvests, down to 40 % of normal yields, while dairy farmers are being forced to send their livestock to slaughter because they are uncertain of being able to obtain enough feed (2). If this type of summer in Norway occurred as a result of random variations, it would happen less than once in 10 000 years (3). If we raise our eyes a little higher above our navels and look all the way to Sweden, we see the worst outbreak of forest fires ever recorded there, with more than 50 fires in mid-July (4).

The rest of the planet has also experienced extreme weather: More than 90 people have died in forest fires in Greece, and in California the largest fire in modern history is burning (5, 6). To date in 2018, the United States has registered six weather disasters that have destroyed goods and property to a value of more than USD 1 billion, with at least 36 deaths (4). Record rainfall in Japan in June led to extreme flooding and more than 200 deaths, before extreme heat in July resulted in further deaths and 22 000 hospital admissions due to heatstroke (4, 5, 7). Not everyone has been as fortunate with the summer as Kari Kjønaas Kjos MP.

There is strong scientific evidence that the entire global climate is changing rapidly as a result of global warming. There is also strong scientific evidence that global warming is anthropogenic and due to greenhouse gas emissions (4, 5, 7)(7–9). The health consequences are already obvious and will worsen: Even with a drastic reduction in greenhouse gases, altogether 48 % of the planet's inhabitants in year 2100 will experience at least 20 days per year of fatal heatwaves (defined as a combination of heat and moisture that exceeds the body's ability to rid itself of excess heat) (10). If the current rate of emissions is maintained, the same will apply to as many as 74 % of earth's inhabitants. A total of 250 000 human lives will be lost each year between 2030 and 2050 as a consequence of climate change (9). Reduced food security and food quality as a result of the increase in atmospheric CO₂ will have considerable global consequences for health. However, theoretically almost half of this can be avoided through a significant cut in global emissions (11).

Climate change is already here (9). Although many of the bleakest consequences may still be averted, we must nevertheless prepare ourselves for more extreme heat and precipitation in the years to come, in Norway also. To minimise the health consequences, national emergency plans are needed to prepare us for increasingly extreme and unpredictable weather. The fight against the warming of our planet is a global one, but prevention of the health consequences is primarily national and local. Science provides the facts and prognoses. The actions to be taken are a political responsibility.

Thus it is discouraging that Kjos is not the only national politician who allows observations made from her living room window to dictate whether she has confidence in the scientific evidence. Her colleague in the Norwegian Storting, Jon Helgheim, explains away scientific facts with conspiracy theories suggesting that the world's

climate scientists 'follow the money' in their quest for answers that the commissioning agents (the government?) would like to have (12). They both remind one vividly of the US congressman Mo Brooks, who has a theory that the rise in sea levels in recent years is not due to climate change, but to pieces of the White Cliffs of Dover falling into the sea (13).

Climate change represents one of the greatest global health challenges of our age, threatening the improvements in global health that have been achieved in recent decades (9). More than ever before we need politicians who trust scientific evidence and do not cling to their own fantasy realities and preposterous conspiracy theories.

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