

In 2002, the Burn Canyon Fire in San Miguel County burned over 30,000 acres near the Town of Norwood. The total cost to local, state and federal governments was close to \$35 million. With record low snowpack levels this winter, 2018 could see the significant drought conditions of 2002, or worse. As a small rural county one major wildfire or flood event could deplete our financial reserves in a few days.

In 2010, Colorado's most destructive wildfire to date ripped through Fourmile Canyon, in Boulder County fueled by hot temperatures and dry conditions. 168 homes were destroyed. Three years later, torrential downpours triggered the infamous September 2013 floods washing away homes, taking lives and causing billions of dollars in damages. Boulder County is still recovering.

While we rely on scientists to pinpoint the exact role climate change played in exacerbating these specific catastrophes, what we do know is that these current trends of extreme weather events, drought and wildfire is what climate scientists forecast will become the new normal in Colorado and across the West.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the impacts that a changing climate holds in store for communities across Colorado. Over the next few decades, climate experts predict a five to tenfold increase in heat waves – imagine almost a month's worth of days with temperatures soaring to 95 degrees or hotter. With more precipitation falling as rain and earlier snowpack melt, our ski season will shrink and water availability will become an even bigger challenge for rivers, farmers and communities. Warmer temperatures will amplify public health threats like ozone pollution, mosquito-borne diseases and asthma and allergy rates, as well as make our forests more susceptible to beetle and other insect outbreaks.

These climate impacts carry an enormous price tag for local governments. A recent analysis by Resilient Analytics looked at just a few of the costs San Miguel and Boulder Counties will incur due to climate change, such as significantly higher road maintenance demands as hotter temperatures and more intense rainfalls cause more road damage, heat waves that trigger the need for cooling strategies to protect vulnerable populations, bridges and culverts that have to be replaced or maintained to accommodate precipitation and streamflow changes, and mitigation efforts to protect communities from elevated wildfire danger. In the next 30 years, San Miguel County's burden is projected to be millions of dollars. With an annual budget of \$27 million, unknown costs that size present a major challenge for us and could result in a huge demand on our taxpayers.

As elected officials in charge of balancing our budget, we know that we simply can't afford to bear the costs of climate change alone. Nor should we.

The world knows with great certainty that our fast-changing climate is the result of humans burning more and more fossil fuels. Analyses can now connect a majority of greenhouse gas emissions to a relatively small number of oil, gas and coal corporations. We also know that these companies were well aware of the dire consequences of their actions but chose business as usual anyway.

Like the tobacco industry, which knew for decades about the link between cigarette smoking and cancer but denied and covered it up, fossil fuel companies also need to be held accountable for the damages they are knowingly causing.

Consequently, San Miguel County is joining with Boulder County and the City of Boulder to bring a lawsuit against oil and gas companies to require them to help pay for the costs of climate change being experienced by local communities like ours. Because of the magnitude of the financial impacts, we feel like we have little choice but to bring this litigation on behalf of our constituents.

Specifically, we are suing Suncor and ExxonMobil, two of the world's largest carbon producers, who have worked together in Colorado to market and sell fossil fuels.

Similar litigation is being spearheaded on both coasts but ours is the first brought in the interior of the country. Including western voices in this conversation is critical—while sea level rise is a major climate change impact, so is earlier snowpack melt and **more numerous and extreme** drought, wildfire, heat waves, bark beetle outbreaks, rainfall events and the other effects that we are experiencing across the Rocky Mountains.

To the best of our ability, San Miguel County has been proactively mitigating and adapting to climate change. We have been working diligently for years to reduce our own carbon footprint and embrace a renewable energy future. We are currently studying the most effective ways to make our communities more resilient to climate impacts. The oil and gas companies must now do their part and pay their fair share.

Climate change is the most urgent issue facing our generation, an existential threat to our future that demands bold action. It's time that we demand climate accountability.

Board of County Commissioners - San Miguel County
Hilary Cooper, Kris Holstrom, Joan May