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OPINION

Payne: Infectious disease, not climate, emerges as globe's greatest health threat

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As late as early March, Michigan's auto companies and government leaders were trumpeting a new economic course based on fears that climate change was the world's greatest health threat.

The US was totally unprepared for coronavirus despite years of infectious disease warnings. Michigan National Guard members move beds for patients with coronavirus at the TCF Center. (Photo: Max Ortiz, The Detroit News)

Then came the coronavirus crisis wake-up call.

Auto companies and governments are now belatedly retooling to fight World War C, investing billions to combat a health crisis that has gripped the planet with citizens making radical changes in their behavior to reduce COVID-19 transmissions — not carbon dioxide emissions.

The new normal confirms what economic and scientific experts at the Copenhagen Consensus and other institutions have warned for decades: That infectious disease, not climate, is humankind's greatest threat and where mitigation dollars can have their biggest impact.

At a March 4 investor event, General Motors Co. CEO Mary Barra laid out a 50-state, National Zero Emissions Vehicle Program to combat global warming: "We believe climate change is real, it's a global concern and the best way to remove automotive ambitions from the environmental equation is an all-electric zero emissions future."

But GM's \$20 billion gamble on electrification with the introduction of 20 EVs by 2023 was quickly drowned out by the coronavirus tsunami. Just six weeks later, all 50 states would be under a major federal disaster declaration for the first time in history — not for rising temperatures, but for fear of an infectious disease. Auto sales tanked and the industry transitioned plants to make ventilators.

GM's climate change ambitions have been echoed by Ford Motor Co., Volkswagen AG, Honda Motor Co. and other automakers — and dovetail with international and state governments whose climate policies are forcing automakers to convert to electric vehicles.

In her first State of the State address last year, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer identified climate change, along with safe drinking water, as the greatest health threat facing the state: "Climate change and extreme weather are already putting Michiganders at risk.

"As a state, we must take that risk seriously. We cannot and will not wait to act," she said. Her warning echoed that of presidential candidates like Joe Biden, who last September called global warming "the single greatest concern for war and disruption in the world."

In the last year, the Whitmer administration has established a new state office of climate and energy and committed Michigan to the United States Climate Alliance, a group of 24 states and Puerto Rico that has vowed to comply with the stringent demands of the Paris climate agreement.

But the escalation of climate preparation — the federal [Government Accounting Office reports the U.S. has designated \\$154 billion](#) to climate-related projects since 1993 — came as scientific experts warned that predictions of global warming had failed to materialize — and that threats of global pandemics were increasing.

In the last 30 years, frightening forecasts of increased temperatures, hurricanes, and tornadoes haven't occurred. For example, the U.N. International Panel on Climate Change, long an activist for global warming mitigation, admits there is “low confidence for the attribution of any detectable changes in tropical cyclone activity to (human) influences.” From 2005-2017, the U.S. experienced the lowest occurrence of hurricanes in recorded history. Closer to home in Michigan, turn-of-the-century predictions that the Great Lakes would dry up have been contradicted by record lake levels today.

Meanwhile, the evidence of infectious global pandemics in a connected world continued to rise with the China-sourced 2002 SARS virus, Mexico-origin 2009 H1N1, and Africa-sourced 2014 Ebola crisis.

As those fears heightened, prominent Danish environmentalist Bjorn Lomborg convened a regular international panel of economists and researchers called the Copenhagen Consensus to assess global challenges — then rationally prioritize them by economic analysis. For example, in 2012, the Nobel laureate-studded panel assessed the question: “If you had \$75 billion for worthwhile causes, where should you start?”

The panel ranked the top 16 of 40 world problems. Climate change didn't make the list, while five disease mitigation crises — including malaria, tuberculosis, and child immunization — did.

“The investments to combat infectious disease are very cheap and effective, even using conservative assumptions,” said Nobel laureate economist Thomas Schelling. “Policy-makers can achieve a great amount in this area.”

Yet America's government and media institutions have hyped global warming fears above all else. As the COVID-19 spread in China in January, the influential New York Times continued a daily drumbeat of climate stories, its Business section warning on Jan. 24 that "Climate Change Could Blow Up the Economy. Banks Aren't Ready."

When the coronavirus hit the U.S. in early March, Michigan and the country were utterly unprepared. As cases accelerated, hospitals found themselves overwhelmed with critical shortages of ventilators. Despite the warnings of past pandemics, medical stockpiles and testing infrastructure were non-existent. The auto industry responded, pivoting quickly from producing vehicles to manufacturing ventilators, masks and face shields.

The federal government botched initial test kits desperately needed for the growing pandemic. Experts say that if the \$184 billion in climate health had been spent on virus mitigation, the U.S. would be in much better shape today.

“Money should be spent anywhere else than climate change,” said James Taylor, who runs the Illinois-based Heartland Institute's Center for Climate and Environmental Policy.

Despite dire warnings of climate catastrophe, U.S. consumers haven't changed their behavior — continuing to buy SUVs as predictions of famine and disappearing lakes failed to materialize. Behavior changed dramatically in face of the very real COVID-19 threat, however, with Americans self-distancing, donning masks and figuring out new ways to work from home while businesses shut down.

The historic COVID-19 crisis may further stiffen Americans against climate expenditures like that advocated by Ann Arbor which plans to spend \$1 billion over the next decade to make the city carbon neutral, including a 50% reduction in personal vehicle miles traveled. Global warming consistently polls low as a public concern with a 2018 Pew poll listing it 22nd of 23 issues. Polls show 30% to 40% of respondents say they are not willing to pay anything.

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Yet the EPA's own numbers show the original 54.5 mpg-by-2025 standard would reduce global temperatures by a negligible three one-thousands of a degree (0.003) Celsius of warming — within the margin of error — over the next 90 years.

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