problem is that once you actually get into discussions on this subject with the other side, it is not long until their guns turn on Medicare, it is not long until their guns turn on Social Security. We have seen it before. They tried to privatize Social Security. They thought they had the power to do it, and the American people told them: Heck no. But that is where the discussion goes. It may start with reality TV shows and pig manure, but before you know it, they have their guns trained on Medicare and Social Security. We need to defend programs such as those on which families depend.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. So on the subject of what we leave to our children and grandchildren, let me turn to the point of my remarks, which is that it is time to wake up in this body to the reality of what we are doing to our climate. It is time to wake up.

Madam President, 2012 was the warmest year in the continental United States since records began being kept in 1895. It is not a unique single anomaly of a year. If you look at the first 12 years of this century, 2000 to 2012, they are all in the 14 warmest years on record. This is not just about future generations, it is not just about polar bears and sea turtles. These trends are being felt right now in real places by real people.

The recent draft of the Federal Government's National Climate Assessment shows, at a local level, why every one of us should care that carbon emissions are causing climate change.

Let's take a little tour. I will start in the Northeast, which includes my home State of Rhode Island. In this region, which is defined in the assessment as from West Virginia to Maine—that is not the Northeast we usually talk about, but that is the way it is defined in this report—annual temperatures have increased by almost 2 degrees Fahrenheit since records began. The entire range between high and low is only about 4.2 degrees, so an increase of 2 full degrees is a big deal in that scale.

If greenhouse gas emissions remain at current levels, the projection is another 4.5 degrees to 10 degrees Fahrenheit of warming by the end of the century. That will change all of our lives in very significant ways. Even if we do reduce emissions, the Northeast is still projected to experience an increase in the frequency, intensity, and duration of heat waves.

By as soon as 2050, Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia could experience twice as many days per year—that is 15 more days in some places—with temperatures over 95 degrees Fahrenheit. In western New York and Massachusetts, where 95-degree days are rare, there may be an additional 5 days per year over that mark. In Rhode Island, a lot of people stay cool in the summer by opening the windows at night, letting the cool night air fill the house, and then closing the drapes or the screens or the shades in the morning. That is not going to work any longer when persistent high nighttime temperatures allow no relief from the heat.

Without significant upgrades, our region's electric grid will not be able to sustain the power demand as more and more air-conditioning becomes necessary for people to be comfortable in the summertime. As we see more hot days, we also see more bad ozone days, which still keep people indoors in Rhode Island or even send them to the hospital, as pollution from Midwest coal plants settles in on us.

In addition to heat, precipitation in the Northeast increased almost one-half of an inch per decade over the last century. Extreme precipitation—very heavy rain or snow—has increased 74 percent between 1958 and 2010. That is the sharpest increase in the Nation.

On our shores—we are a very coastal State—due to a combination of warming and expanding oceans and other tectonic conditions, sea level has risen about 1 foot in the Northeast since 1900.

That is higher than the 8-inch global average sea-level rise. Sea-level rise is actually up 10 inches at the Newport tide gauge since our terrible hurricane of 1938. Because of extreme precipitation and sea-level rise, more and more populated areas are at risk of flooding.

Let's move to the Southeast where the draft assessment predicts more extreme heat with the number of 95-degree or hotter days in the region from Louisiana through central Florida expected to quadruple by mid-century. If you like it hot down there, you are a lucky person because you are going to get a lot more of it.

Southerners will likely see something much less appealing, which is more ground-level ozone, better known as smog, which poses serious health risks especially to children and the elderly. But the real story of the Southeast is one of disastrous weather. Between 1980 and 2011, the Southeast was struck by more billion-dollar disasters than any other part of the country. The region is particularly vulnerable to extreme weather, and sea-level rise makes things worse.

The RAND Corporation notes that 1,800 square miles of Louisiana have been lost to the sea since the 1930s. Entergy, a regional utility, predicts $23 billion in losses by 2030, factoring just a 6-inch increase in sea level and a 3-percent increase in hurricane wind speed. Communities in the Southeast need to take real steps to become more resilient in the changing environment. North Carolina, for instance, is raising highway bridges out to the Outer Banks as seas rise and storms worsen.

In the Midwest, temperatures are increasing rapidly. From 1900 to 2010, average temperatures increased about 1 degree Fahrenheit, and the rate of warming tripled between 1980 and 2010. Under the assessment's worst-case scenarios, temperatures across the Midwest are projected to rise 8.5 degrees Fahrenheit by the year 2100. If you are a farmer, that means everything will have changed.

Hotter temperatures are having a far-reaching impact on the Great Lakes. According to the Cleveland Plain Dealer, scientists at NOAA's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory have found that the Great Lakes are taking in more heat from the air during the summer and storing it longer. The result: On average, ice on the Great Lakes is forming later in the winter and disappearing earlier. In fact, total ice cover has fallen 71 percent on the Great Lakes from 1973 to 2010.

That is not good for the lakes, the people, and species of this region. Ice cover protects the lakes from evaporation, and it protects the eggs of fall-spawning fish from winter weather. Coastal areas unprotected by shore ice are more susceptible to erosion. Less ice means less snowmobiling or ice fishing. As anyone in Cleveland or Buffalo can tell you, open water fuels the dread lake-effect snows that wallop leeward shores. All of this can be traced, in part, to climate change driven by greenhouse gases.

In the Great Plains, the most significant consequence of a changing climate will be changes in rainfall. This is already beginning to happen. Total rain is expected to increase in Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, while Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas are projected to get less. Farming and the energy sector, including oil and gas exploration, will feel increased pressure and competition for water supplies. Eighty percent of the population of the Great Plains depends on the High Plains aquifer for drinking water. Projected temperature increases, more frequent droughts, and higher rates of evaporation spell serious trouble for the region's water supply if water isn't managed better.

The availability of water, and even snow, will also affect the Southwest. People of the Southwest are acutely aware of how their history and their fate is tied to the availability of water. According to the draft assessment:

> Over the past 50 years across most of the Southwest, there has been less late-winter precipitation falling as snow, earlier snow melt, and earlier arrival of most of the year's streamflow.

These changes can ripple through the economy and the health of the region.

In the western mountains, massive forests stand dead on the mountainsides, as warmer winters allow the killer bark beetle to swarm northward into higher latitudes and uphill into higher altitudes. Ominously, the draft assessment says that the combined impact of increasing wildfire, insect outbreaks, and diseases will cause:

> Almost complete loss of subalpine forests . . . by the 2080s.

Separate studies by scientists at NASA and at the University of Washington predict increasing frequency of severe wildfires.

The Park City Foundation in Utah predicted an annual local temperature increase of 6.8 degrees Fahrenheit by 2075, which would cause a total loss of snowpack in the Park City resort area. This would result, obviously, in thousands of lost jobs, tens of millions in lost earnings, and hundreds of millions in lost economic output.

In the coastal zone of the Pacific Northwest, erosion inundation and ocean acidity are all major threats. More than 140,000 acres of coastal Washington and Oregon lie within 3.3 feet of high tide. Sea-level rise of 4 feet or more is entirely plausible by the end of the century.

Ocean acidification caused a 70- to 80-percent loss of oyster larvae at an oyster hatchery in Oregon from 2006 to 2008. Wild oyster stocks in Washington State have also failed as weather patterns caused more acidic water to rise to the surface at the shore. This is an industry worth about $73 million annually.

For Hawaii, the rapidly changing climate presents a unique threat. Tourism and agriculture, among Hawaii's top economic sectors, are each distinctly vulnerable. Changes in precipitation, erosion, ocean warming, and acidification will irreversibly alter Hawaiian ecosystems, home to about one-quarter of all threatened and endangered species in the United States.

For example, we know that warm enough water causes corals to bleach. Bleaching is a technical term that I won't go into right now. Bleaching can help coral survive short-term stresses, but in response to persistent ocean warming, bleaching signals the start of a long-term downward spiral toward the death of the coral and the reefs, the incubators of the oceans.

Perhaps no other region of the United States is experiencing the effects of climate change more dramatically than Alaska. Alaska is, of course, supposed to be cold. The animals and plants have adapted to that, and so have the people.

Since the 1960s, however, Alaska has been warming twice as fast as the rest of the United States. Annual air temperature has already increased by 3 degrees Fahrenheit. Winter temperatures are up 6 degrees.

According to the draft assessment highlights, Alaska is seeing—and this is a graph of the sea ice:

Earlier spring snow melt, reduced sea ice, widespread glacier retreat, warmer permafrost, and dryer landscapes.

By mid-century, summer sea ice could disappear altogether. As in the Great Lakes, less ice along the Alaska coast means more severe coastal erosion without the ice to buffer the shores from storms. Most of the permafrost in Alaska is tens of thousands of years old, but it too is disappearing as the Alaska climate warms. Permafrost is a natural wonder whose loss threatens structures such as buildings, roads, as well as plants and wildlife that have adapted to the frozen tundra. Thawing permafrost buckles roads and air strips, causing costly disruptions in transportation.

It appears, as we take this tour of the country, that there is only one region that isn't yet awakening to the effects of climate change, and that is here, Capitol Hill. History is calling out to us to meet our duty, and the call is loud and clear, but we are sleepwalking. It is time to wake up. The public has every reason to want to grab us and give us a good shake. An AP poll out in December found that 83 percent of Democrats, 77 percent of Independents, and 70 percent of Republicans accept the reality of climate change and understand that it will be a serious problem for our United States.

A recent poll conducted by Yale University and George Mason University found that a large majority of Americans, 77 percent, say climate change should be a priority for President Obama and for all of us in Congress. But we snooze on, listening to the lullabies of the polluters.

Carbon pollution from fossil fuels is threatening our future, and unless we take serious action to scale back the pollution, the consequences are looking increasingly dire all across our country. It is time to hear the alarms, to roll up our sleeves, to get to work, and to do what needs to be done. It is time, indeed, to wake up.

I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. CANTWELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PAYCHECK FAIRNESS ACT

Ms. CANTWELL. Madam President, I come to the Senate floor to join my colleagues on the women's side of the Senate who will be coming to the floor this morning, along with Senator MIKULSKI—and I thank her for her leadership—to talk about pay equity and the issue of equal pay for equal work.

I am proud to stand here on what is the 4-year anniversary of the historic Lilly Ledbetter legislation that we were able to pass. What an unbelievable moment that was, to work for what is equal treatment for women in our court system. Lilly Ledbetter went across the Nation and came to Congress and communicated very well to many Americans on this issue that sometimes you could be discriminated against and not even know it until your retirement, which was the case with her. Yet the legal system failed to take any action at that point. So we passed the Lilly Ledbetter legislation to make sure that in our court system women could find out and have those remedies brought before our system and fight for equal pay.

My State of Washington has been a leader in increasing the minimum wage. We have a minimum wage that is indexed to inflation, and I am proud of that. But pay disparity continues to persist between men and women, and that is why I am here, to urge my colleagues to help close this gap. We are here to advocate for the Paycheck Fairness Act because full-time working women still earn 75 percent of what their male counterparts earn for the same job, according to a report by the Economic Opportunity Institute.

While the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was a step forward, we need to pass this additional legislation to help end pay inequity and take the next steps toward helping women. The Paycheck Fairness Act will help us move toward closing the gap between men and women, and it does the following things: It requires employers to provide justification other than gender for paying men higher wages than for women; it protects employees who share the same salary information from potential retaliation from their employers; and it provides victims of pay discrimination the same remedies available to victims of other kinds of discrimination, including punitive and compensatory damages.

This bill also helps create outreach programs for employers to help them understand this issue and to help end pay disparity. I certainly look forward to the passing of this legislation because closing this gap means women in my State will be able to afford 13 more months of rent or 39 more months of family health insurance premiums, according to an estimate by the National Partnership for Women and Families.

We have to level the playing field so these kinds of estimates are not just projections but they are realities. We can't support the status quo while the economic security of women and families is undermined. One-third of families headed by women in my State are in poverty. This can be attributed, in part, to policies that perpetuate lower pay for women. So we must end unequal pay practices and level the playing field.

It is in this spirit of fair play that we ask for the passage of the Paycheck Fairness Act. I know Senator MIKULSKI and others who have fought hard on this legislation will be here to speak this morning, and I am proud we are sponsors of the Paycheck Fairness Act that was introduced just last week. Today, almost 50 years after passage of the Equal Pay Act and 4 years after the passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, we still need to hit another giant milestone in helping women get fair pay in America.

We made a big step toward all this with Lilly Ledbetter's leadership, but now we need to pass this new legislation. It was an important milestone