

# Defending the Home Planet

*The earth is a fine world and worth fighting for.*  
Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Like me, some of you may have been following the agonizing news about the unprecedented brushfires in Australia that have devastated human, animal, and vegetative life in that country so culturally akin to our own.<sup>1</sup> For many people who believe the overwhelming majority of scientific reports on climate change, these apocalyptic fires are an empirical demonstration of the truth of the dire prophecies for the future of our planet. Scientists have demonstrated that although climate change may not have caused the worst fires in Australia's history, they may have contributed to the conditions that enabled them to spread so far and wide and reach such a destructive intensity.<sup>2</sup> The heart-breaking pictures of singed koalas and displaced people and the helpless feeling that all I can do from here is donate money set me to thinking about the relationship between the military, health, and climate change, which is the subject of this column.

As I write this in mid-January of a new decade and glance at the weather headlines, I read about an earthquake in Puerto Rico and tornadoes in the southern US. This makes it quite plausible that our comfortable lifestyle and technological civilization could in the coming decades go the way of the dinosaurs, also victims of climate change.

Initially, my first thought about this relationship is a negative one—images of scorched earth policies that stretch back to ancient wars jump to mind. Reflection and research on the topic though suggest that the relationship may be more complicated and conflicted. Alas, I can only touch on a few of the themes in this brief format.

It may not be as obvious that climate change also threatens the military, which is the guardian of that civilization. In 2018, for example, Hurricane Michael caused nearly \$5 billion in damages to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida.<sup>3</sup> A year later, the US Department of Defense (DoD) released a report on the effects of climate change as mandated by Congress.<sup>4</sup> Even

though some congressional critics expressed concern about the report's lack of depth and detail,<sup>5</sup> the report asserted that, "The effects of a changing climate are a national security issue with potential impacts to Department of Defense (DoD or the Department) missions, operational plans, and installations."<sup>4</sup>

The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is not immune either. Natural disasters have already disrupted the delivery of health care at its many aging facilities. Climate change was called the "engine"<sup>6</sup> driving Hurricane Maria, which in 2017 slammed into Puerto Rico, including its VA medical center, and resulted in shortages of supplies, staff, and basic utilities.<sup>7</sup> The facility and the island are still trying to rebuild. In response to weather-exposed vulnerability in VA infrastructure, Senator and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI), the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Military Construction, sent a letter to VA leadership arguing that "Strengthening VA's resilience to climate change is consistent with the agency's mission to deliver timely, high-quality care and benefits to America's veterans."<sup>8</sup>

It has been reported that the current administration has countered initiatives to prepare for the challenges of providing health care to service members and veterans in a climate changed world.<sup>9</sup> Sadly, but predictably, in the politicized federal health care arena, the safety of our service members and, in turn, the domestic and national security and peace that depend on them are caught in the partisan debate over global warming, though it is not likely Congress or federal agency leaders will abandon planning to safeguard service members who will see duty and combat in a radically altered ecology and veterans and who will need to have VA continue to be the reliable safety net despite an increasingly erratic environment.<sup>10</sup>

Climate change is a divisive political issue; there is a proud tradition of conservatism and self-reliance in military members, active duty



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and veteran alike. That was why I was surprised and impressed when I saw the results of a recent survey on climate change. In January 2019, 293 active-duty service members and veterans were surveyed. Participants were selected to reflect the ethnic makeup, educational level, and political allegiance of the military population, which enhanced the validity of the findings.<sup>11</sup>

Participants were asked to indicate whether they believed that the earth was warming secondary to human or natural processes; not growing warmer at all; or whether they were unsure. Similar to the general population, 46% agreed that climate change is anthropogenic.<sup>11</sup> More than three-fourths believed it was likely climate change would adversely affect the places they worked, like military installations; 61% thought it likely that global warming could lead to armed conflict over resources. Seven in 10 respondents believed that climate is changing vs 46% who did not. Of respondents who believe climate change is real, 87% see it as a threat to military bases compared with 60% who do not accept the science that the earth is warming.<sup>11</sup>

This survey, though, is only a small study, and the military and VA are big tents under which a wide range of political persuasions and diverse beliefs co-exist. There are many readers of *Federal Practitioner* who will no doubt reject nearly every word I have written, in what I know is a controversial column. But it matters that the military and veteran constituency are thinking and speaking about the issue of climate change.<sup>11</sup> Why? The answer takes us back to the disaster in Australia. When the fires and the devastation they wrought escalated beyond the powers of the civil authorities to handle, it was the military whose technical skill, coordinated readiness, and personal courage and dedication that was called on to rescue thousands of civilians from the inferno.<sup>12</sup> So it will be in our country and around the world when disasters—manmade, natural, or both—threaten to engulf life in all its wondrous variety. Those who battle extreme weather will have unique health needs, and their valiant sacrifices deserve to have health care systems ready and able to treat them.

## Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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