

Climate Matters

A Comprehensive Educational Resource Program for Broadcast Meteorologists

BY BERNADETTE WOODS PLACKY, EDWARD MAIBACH, JOE WITTE, BUD WARD,
KEITH SEITTER, NED GARDINER, DAVID HERRING, AND HEIDI CULLEN

Global climate change is influencing the weather in every region of the United States, often in harmful ways, and these impacts are projected to become more severe over the coming decades. Increases in extreme weather events, and changes in local climate, can have important consequences for human health and safety, agriculture, water resources, transportation, energy supplies, and the resilience of ecosystems. Yet, most Americans view climate change as a threat that is distant in space (i.e., not here) and time (i.e., not now). Whether they recognize it or not, members of the public, policymakers, business managers, and other professionals make important climate-dependent planning decisions (e.g., where to purchase a home, how to ensure the adequacy of water supplies, or how to power a manufacturing plant that is slated for renovation). To manage risk and avoid harm, it is imperative that these decisions be made with the best possible understanding of changing climatic conditions.

Broadcast meteorologists are ideally positioned to educate Americans about the current and projected

impacts of climate change in their community. First, they have tremendous reach: Local TV news remains a top news source for American adults, and more than half (58%) say they watch local news primarily for the weather forecast. Plus, the audience for weather on digital platforms is growing rapidly—by 7.2% in 2012. Weathercasters' audiences are not only large, they are also diverse, spanning all educational, income, and racial/ethnic groups. Second, weathercasters are trusted sources of information about climate change, second only to climate scientists and government science agencies. Weather is not political, so weather information is not confused with political opinion. Third, many weathercasters are scientists themselves, having trained in meteorology or other relevant sciences, and are highly skilled science communicators. They are expert at appropriately simplifying complex scientific information for the benefit of the public. Fourth, most weathercasters say they are interested in informing their viewers about the local impacts of climate change, and that it is appropriate for them to do so. Fifth and last, when people understand that they have personally experienced climate change, they are more likely to take the issue seriously. Most people who feel they have personally experienced climate change cite changes in weather patterns and seasons in their community as the ways in which they have experienced it.

Yet, broadcast meteorologists say they experience significant barriers in reporting on climate change, including a lack of time to prepare and air stories; lack of access to high-quality content that can be rapidly used in their broadcasts, social media, and community presentations; and a lack of access to climate scientists for advice and interviews.

To test the premise that TV weathercasters can be effective climate educators, in 2010 George Mason University, Climate Central, and WLTX-TV in

AFFILIATIONS: PLACKY AND CULLEN—Climate Central, Princeton, New Jersey; MAIBACH—George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, Fairfax, Virginia; WITTE—Adnet/NASA-Goddard, Greenbelt, Maryland; WARD—Yale Climate Connections, School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, New Haven, Connecticut; SEITTER—American Meteorological Society, Boston, Massachusetts; HERRING AND GARDINER—NOAA Climate Program Office, Silver Spring, Maryland

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Edward Maibach, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 20854

E-mail: emaibach@gmu.edu

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Columbia, South Carolina, developed and pilot-tested *Climate Matters*, an occasional series of short segments intended to make clear the local impacts of climate change. From the viewers' point of view, *Climate Matters* was well received; the broadcast segments were something audience members had never seen before—locally relevant information about climate change. From WLTX's point of view—led by Chief Meteorologist Jim Gandy and his news director, Marybeth Jacoby—the *Climate Matters* collaboration allowed them to cover the local impacts of climate change in a manner that otherwise would not have been possible. During the first year, they aired more than a dozen stories and posted related web content. Indeed, WLTX is so pleased with *Climate Matters*—now in its fourth year—that it continues to actively use new *Climate Matters* content, and its market share for news has grown. A brief NOAA video of Gandy and Jacoby talking about their experience with *Climate Matters* can be seen here: www.climate.gov/news-features/videos/climate-matters. To formally evaluate *Climate Matters*, we conducted pre- and post-test surveys of local TV news viewers in Columbia. We found that, after one year, WLTX viewers had developed a more science-based understanding of climate change than viewers of other local news stations. In short, the pilot test confirmed our two key premises: TV weathercasters can report on the local implications of climate change; and when they do, their viewers learn.

In 2012, Climate Central expanded the program to 10 broadcast meteorologists and weekly delivery of localized climate change content. With the goal of recruiting 50 additional weathercasters, in 2013 the program was made available to any interested broadcast meteorologist in the United States. By the end of 2013, more than 100 weathercasters had enrolled, including 36% of all weathercasters in three Virginia media markets who were specifically invited to participate as part of a statewide pilot test. The number of participating weathercasters nationwide grew to nearly 200 by the end of 2014, including 35 weathercasters from Spanish-language TV stations; Spanish translations of *Climate Matters* were made available as of May 2014. As of July 2015, over 250 local weathercasters (at 185 stations, in 105 markets) are participating in the program. This rapid growth in enrollment in *Climate Matters* confirms what surveys of TV weathercasters had previously suggested—that large numbers of weathercasters are interested in informing their viewers about the local relevance of climate change.

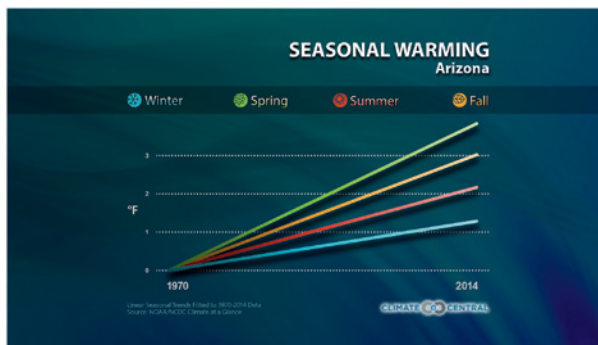


FIG. 1. An example of a *Climate Matters* graphic: seasonal warming.

Meteorologists who participate in the *Climate Matters* program receive a wide range of material and resources to help them communicate the science and local impacts of climate change. A team of meteorologists, research scientists, data analysts, journalists, and creative designers at Climate Central produces a weekly content package on various climate change topics. Each *Climate Matters* package features customized analyses produced into TV-ready visuals that are localized to specific markets when possible (see an example in Fig. 1, and its use by Phoenix, Arizona, broadcast meteorologist Amber Sullins in Fig. 2), a detailed write-up on the latest science behind the weekly topic, climate change information from NASA and NOAA, and a round-up of climate science research and news.

Each *Climate Matters* package is produced to be timely and relevant (i.e., newsworthy from a meteorologist's perspective). Packages typically focus on one of five story genres, including breaking news (such as 2014 as the hottest year on record); current large-scale weather or climate events (such as drought in the West); a seasonal trend or event (such as the

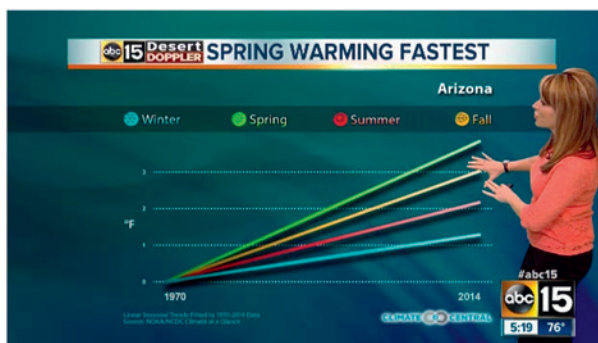


FIG. 2. Broadcast meteorologist Amber Sullins presenting the seasonal warming graphic.

lengthening frost-free season); a tie-in to a thematic event (such as a holiday); or release of an important climate science report (such as the National Climate Assessment).

Since the role of broadcast meteorologists extends beyond the TV weathercast, *Climate Matters* includes online interactives that can be embedded on websites and shared through social media, already-crafted tweetable facts, and a range of resources that can be used in community outreach presentations. In addition, Climate Central provides video and production support to meteorologists interested in producing climate change stories and specials.

Climate Matters also offers continuing education opportunities in the form of webinars (10–12 per year) and workshops (one each year at both the AMS Broadcast and NWA Conferences). These events give TV meteorologists an opportunity to learn from and work with climate experts, while earning credits toward AMS and NWA certifications. All events are archived at www.climatecentral.org/workshops-and-webinars.

Climate Matters is a comprehensive climate change resource for broadcast meteorologists. All current and past *Climate Matters* materials are available online at www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters, and in Spanish at www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters-spanish-edition. The *Climate Matters* Facebook page includes examples of how the materials have been used in recent broadcasts by a range of weathercasters: www.facebook.com/climate.matters/videos.

With funding from the National Science Foundation, we are now conducting surveys and other research activities to better understand the needs of broadcast meteorologists and news viewers, with the aim of improving both the usability and educational effectiveness of *Climate Matters* materials. We are also conducting a nationwide impact evaluation of *Climate Matters* so as to assess its contribution, if any, to improving public understanding of the local relevance of climate change.

As a resource that is available to all broadcast meteorologists in the United States, *Climate Matters* serves a vital and emerging need in broadcast meteorology. Meteorologists have long played an important role in warning the public about dangerous weather, helping them to prepare, and keeping them safe. With serious new dangers emerging as a result of climate change, meteorologists can play an important new role in helping families, businesses, and communities prepare and stay safe.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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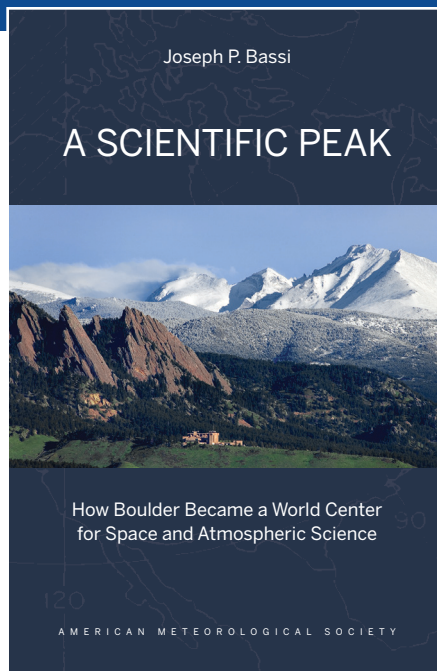
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