Earth is a wilder, warmer place since last climate deal made

By Seth Borenstein, AP

PARIS — This time, it's a hotter, waterier, wilder Earth that world leaders are trying to save.

The last time that the nations of the world struck a binding agreement to fight global warming was 1997, in Kyoto, Japan. As leaders gather for a conference in Paris on Monday to try to do more, it's clear things have changed dramatically over the past 18 years.

Some differences can be measured: degrees on a thermometer, trillions of tons of melting ice, a rise in sea level of a couple of inches. Epic weather disasters, including punishing droughts, killer heat waves and monster storms, have plagued Earth.

As a result, climate change is seen as a more urgent and concrete problem than it was last time.

"At the time of Kyoto, if someone talked about climate change, they were talking about something that was abstract in the future," said Marcia McNutt, the former U.S. Geological Survey director who was picked to run the National Academies of Sciences. "Now, we're talking about changing climate, something that's happening now. You can point to event after event that is happening in the here and now that is a direct result of changing climate."

Other, nonphysical changes since 1997 make many experts more optimistic than in previous climate negotiations.

For one, improved technology is pointing to the possibility of a world weaned from fossil fuels, which emit heat-trapping gases. Businesses and countries are more serious about doing something, in the face of evidence that some of science's worst-case scenarios are coming to pass.

"I am quite stunned by how much the Earth has changed since 1997," Princeton University's Bill Anderegg said in an email. "In many cases (e.g. Arctic sea ice loss, forest die-off due to drought), the speed of climate change is proceeding even faster than we thought it would two decades ago."

Some of the cold numbers on global warming since 1997:

- The West Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets have lost 5.5 trillion tons of ice, or 5 trillion metric tons, according to Andrew Shepherd at the University of Leeds, who used NASA and European satellite data.
- The five-year average surface global temperature for January to October has risen by nearly two-thirds of a degree Fahrenheit, or 0.36 degrees Celsius, between 1993-97 and 2011-15, according to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In 1997, Earth set a record for the hottest year, but it didn't last. Records were set in 1998, 2005, 2010 and 2014, and it is sure to happen again in 2015 when the results are in from the year, according to NOAA.
- The average glacier has lost about 39 feet, or 12 meters, of ice thickness since 1997, according to Samuel Nussbaumer at the World Glacier Monitoring Service in Switzerland.
- With 1.2 billion more people in the world, carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels climbed nearly 50 percent between 1997 and 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. The world is spewing more than 100 million tons of carbon dioxide a day now.
- The seas have risen nearly 2 1/2 inches, or 6.2 centimeters, on average since 1997, according to

calculations by the University of Colorado.

- At its low point during the summer, the Arctic sea ice is on average 820,000 square miles smaller than it was 18 years ago, according to the National Snow and Ice Data Center. That’s a loss equal in area to Texas, California, Montana, New Mexico and Arizona combined.
- The five deadliest heat waves of the past century — in Europe in 2003, Russia in 2010, India and Pakistan this year, Western Europe in 2006 and southern Asia in 1998 — have come in the past 18 years, according to the International Disaster Database run by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disaster in Belgium.
- The number of weather and climate disasters worldwide has increased 42 percent, though deaths are down 58 percent. From 1993 to 1997, the world averaged 221 weather disasters that killed 3,248 people a year. From 2010 to 2014, the yearly average of weather disasters was up to 313, while deaths dropped to 1,364, according to the disaster database.

Eighteen years ago, the discussion was far more about average temperatures, not the freakish extremes. Now, scientists and others realize it is in the more frequent extremes that people are truly experiencing climate change.

Witness the “large downpours, floods, mudslides, the deeper and longer droughts, rising sea levels from the melting ice, forest fires,” former Vice President Al Gore, who helped negotiate the 1997 agreement, told The Associated Press. “There’s a long list of events that people can see and feel viscerally right now. Every night on the television news is like a nature hike through the Book of Revelation.”

Studies have shown that man-made climate change contributed in a number of recent weather disasters. Among those that climate scientists highlight as most significant: the 2003 European heat wave that killed 70,000 people in the deadliest such disaster in a century; Hurricane Sandy, worsened by sea level rise, which caused more than $67 billion in damage and claimed 159 lives; the 2010 Russian heat wave that left more than 55,000 dead; the drought still gripping California; and Typhoon Haiyan, which killed more than 6,000 in the Philippines in 2013.

Still, “while the Earth is a lot more dangerous on one side, the technologies are a lot better than they were,” said Jeffrey Sachs, director of Columbia University’s Earth Institute. Solar and wind have come down tremendously in price, so much so that a Texas utility gives away wind-generated electricity at night.

Another big change is China.

In Kyoto, China and developing countries weren’t required to cut emissions. Global warming was seen as a problem for the U.S. and other rich nations to solve. But now China – by far the world’s No. 1 carbon polluter – has reached agreement with the U.S. to slow emissions and has become a leader in solar power.

“The negotiations are no longer defined by rich and poor,” Gore said. “There’s a range of countries in the middle, emerging economies, and thankfully some of them have stepped up to shoulder some of the responsibility.”

U.N. climate chief Christiana Figueres said there’s far less foot-dragging in negotiations: “There is not a single country that tells me they don’t want a good Paris agreement.”

Figueres said that while the Kyoto agreement dictated to individual nations how much they must cut, what comes out of Paris will be based on what the more than 150 countries say they can do. That tends to work better, she said.

It has to, Figueres said. “The urgency is much clearer now than it used to be.”

Climate change warnings go beyond weather shifts

By Chris Mooney, Washington Post

ELEUTHERA, Bahamas — Standing atop a 60-foot cliff overlooking the Atlantic, James Hansen — the retired NASA scientist sometimes dubbed the "father of global warming" — examines two small rocks through a magnifying glass. Towering above him is the source of one of the shards: a huge boulder from a pair locals call "the Cow and the Bull," the largest of which is estimated to weigh more than 1,000 tons.

The two giants have long been tourist attractions along this rocky coast. Perched not far from the edge of a steep cliff that plunges down into blue water, they raise an obvious question: How did they get up here?

Compounding the mystery, these two are among a series of giant boulders arranged in an almost perfect line across a narrow part of this 110-mile-long, wishbone-shaped island.

Hansen and Paul Hearty — a wiry, hammer-slinging geologist from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington who has joined him here as a guide — have a theory about these rocks. It's so provocative — and, frankly, terrifying — that some critics wonder whether the man who helped spawn the whole debate about the dangers of climate change has finally gone too far.

The idea is that Earth's climate went through a warming period just over 100,000 years ago that was similar in many ways to the warming now attributed to the actions of man. And the changes during that period were so catastrophic, they spawned massively powerful superstorms, causing violent ocean waves that simply lifted the boulders from below and deposited them atop this cliff.

If this is true, the effort kicking off in Paris this week to hold the world's nations to strict climate targets may be even more urgent than most people realize.

Read the whole story

Caesars appeals court ruling that opens it up to $364 mil. claim

By Kimberly Pierceall, AP

Casino giant Caesars Entertainment is appealing a bankruptcy court ruling that could put it on the hook for nearly $364 million.

That's the amount a pension fund wants Caesars to pay in installments for 20 years after the company's largest subsidiary filed for bankruptcy protection in January.

The National Retirement Fund, which manages pensions for 400,000 unionized workers from a variety of employers, wants to oust Caesars, forcing it to cover the cost of promised pensions.

The fund has estimated Caesars would need to pay nearly $6 million each quarter, or $24 million a year for 20 years.

Caesars is the parent company of Harrah's Lake Tahoe and

Harvey in Stateline.

Caesars has been the largest fund contributor, paying $13 million annually, according to the court's ruling. The company has said in legal filings that it had no intention of stopping payments or leaving the fund on its own.

The fund's counsel, Ronald Richman, said it made the decision to expel Caesars to protect the fund's financial condition and employee benefits, fearing the fund could suffer depending on what might happen in the subsidiary's complicated and contentious bankruptcy case. "The fund has been hurt very badly by companies that have gone into bankruptcy," he said.

Pension funds are considered unsecured creditors, among the last groups and individuals owed in bankruptcy cases behind more senior creditors.

He said the amount the fund is seeking from Caesars isn't a penalty but a calculation based on Caesars' prior contributions compared to all employer contributions and the pension fund's total underfunded liabilities.

Lawyers for Caesars have also said the fund's demand could affect Caesars' ability to help its subsidiary emerge from bankruptcy by promising payments to senior creditors. Caesars Entertainment Operating Corp. is hoping to shed about $10 billion of $18.4 billion in debt.

The National Retirement Fund has been skeptical, though, noting in court filings that Caesars has $2.1 billion in assets and has a market capitalization of $1.4 billion, which wouldn't prevent the company from helping its subsidiary even with the additional fund payments.

Caesars had primarily argued in a Chicago bankruptcy court that the same protections that shield its subsidiary from claims while it's working on a restructuring plan should also protect the parent company from the fund's effort in this case.

Judge Benjamin Goldgar denied Caesars' motion to extend the automatic stay on Nov. 12, saying the fund efforts weren't directed at the bankrupt subsidiary. Caesars filed its appeal Monday.

The fund, which has $2.5 billion in assets, has been in critical financial shape. Analysts forecast it to be underfunded for the next 10 years after the recession took a toll on invested funds and as employees live longer.

Caesars' legal tussle with the National Retirement Fund began in January when trustees of the fund voted to expel the company's five businesses from the fund — Bally's, Caesars and Harrah's casino-hotels in Atlantic City, Harrah's Philadelphia and Parball Corp. — after creditors attempted to force the company into an involuntary bankruptcy case in Delaware, and before Caesars filed for bankruptcy protection in Chicago on its own.

The timing of the bankruptcy case is still being argued in court.

Growth — but not expansion — in U.S. Internet gambling market

By Wayne Parry, AP

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — Internet gambling is slowly growing — but not expanding — after 2 1/2 years of online betting in the United States.

Online gambling revenue is increasing in at least two of the three states that currently offer it — New Jersey and Delaware. The third, Nevada, doesn’t report Internet revenue separately.

But a hoped-for wave of expansion has not happened as many states sit on the sidelines and assess the costs and benefits of the nascent industry.

“Internet gambling revenue in Delaware, Nevada and New Jersey badly missed initial forecasts, which themselves were overly aggressive,” said Chris Krafcik, research director for Gambling Compliance, which tracks gambling legislation nationwide.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie’s administration, for example, had initially estimated Internet gambling would bring in $1 billion in its first year. It did about 12 percent of that.

“The negative PR that resulted, fair or not, really took the wind out of the expansionary sails,” Krafcik said.

San Francisco-based Gambling Compliance predicts either California or Pennsylvania will approve Internet gambling next year, followed by New York and Mississippi in subsequent years. In 2016, the group projects, nine states will consider legalizing it, though not necessarily act to approve it.

The industry still faces some nagging issues, as well as looming threats — including an effort in Congress to ban Internet gambling nationwide. The Restoration of America’s Wire Act has been introduced in both chambers this year, backed by billionaire casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, and could come up for a hearing next month.

New Jersey began offering Internet gambling on Nov. 25, 2013, and took in $122 million in its first full year. Over the first 10 months of this year, the Atlantic City casinos have already equaled that total, with their Internet gambling revenue up 17.6 percent from the same period last year.

Delaware won $1.4 million in fiscal year 2014; $1.8 million in 2015, and $500,000 so far this fiscal year, which runs from July through June.

Nevada stopped reporting Internet gambling revenue as a separate item at the end of 2014. Online poker, the only brand of online gambling Nevada offers, is just a drop in the bucket of the state's $11 billion gambling market.

Online poker is the most popular form of Internet gambling, although the small number of states offering it has kept prize pools low. New Jersey has sought to partner with other states that might legalize it to offer larger, joint prize pools.

PokerStars, the world's largest Internet poker site, will begin operating in New Jersey in the first half of 2016, and many industry executives expect it to grow the market, though how much remains to be seen. In March, Morgan Stanley cut its estimate of the potential U.S. Internet gambling market by nearly half, pegging it at $2.7 billion by 2020, down from an initial estimate of $5 billion.

At first, one of the main impediments to people getting online to gamble was funding their accounts. Many credit cards wary of running afoul of a law banning banks from funding illegal Internet bets were reluctant to process transactions, but that has changed. New Jersey says MasterCard is approving 70 percent of attempted Internet gambling transactions in the state, while Visa is at 62 percent. PayPal also recently agreed to participate.

From a legal and consumer protection standpoint, Internet gambling has proven to be reliable and transparent, said David Rebuck, New Jersey's top gambling regulator. Technology to ensure a player is actually within the state's borders have reduced false rejections — initially a problem — to a negligible issue. And it's keeping most outsiders from gambling illegally: only two people were found to have successfully placed bets from outside New Jersey since 2013, Rebuck said. Officials confiscated the money in their accounts, totaling about $1,000.

In New Jersey, Internet gambling was seen as a lifeline to Atlantic City's struggling casinos. Less than a year after it began, four of its 12 casinos went out of business. But for those that remain, Internet gambling often makes the difference between an up or a down month.

"The market was smaller than a lot of people predicted, but the market is growing pretty nicely now," said Tom Ballance, president of the Borgata, Atlantic City's top casino and its leading online winner.

Internet gambling has generated $6 million in earnings for the Borgata over the first three quarters of this year, Ballance said.

"In Atlantic City, $6 million in profit is not easy to come by," he said. "We'll take that anytime."

Associated Press writers Michelle Rindels in Carson City and Randall Chase in Wilmington, Del., contributed to this story.

CalPERS private equity investment fees: $1 billion

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

CalPERS on Tuesday released long-anticipated figures on how much it pays the companies that manage its private-equity investments: more than $1 billion in the latest fiscal year.

Pension fund officials said CalPERS earned a $4.1 billion profit from those investments.

The release came after the California Public Employees' Retirement System was criticized by some in the financial community after acknowledging earlier this year that it didn't know how much it was paying in management fees on its private equity portfolio.

Read the whole story

Home ownership slide threatens American Dream

By Rick Hampson, USA Today

NORTH LAS VEGAS, Nev. — A decade ago, when 5,000 settlers a month were arriving in this valley, the suburban frontier moved out into the desert so fast the ZIP codes couldn't keep up.

Then came the financial crisis, and the frontier stopped at places like the back fence of 4132 Recktenwall Ave.

The four-bedroom house there, meant to be owned by its residents, is today a rental. And the Severance family, meant to be owners, are its $1,365-a-month renters.

It's all part of a national shift away from home ownership and toward renting.

The U.S. home ownership rate peaked 10 years ago. Since then it has dropped from more than 69 percent to less than 64 percent, where it was a half century ago, with each percentage point representing more than a million households.

Read the whole story

Litigation expected over 'values' license plate

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY — Nevada residents may soon be able to proclaim their support for the right to life for unborn children by requesting a special license plate from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The Nevada "Values Life" vanity license plate was approved last month by a panel of lawmakers serving as the Commission on Special License Plates. The vote was 3-1 to approve the plate with the lone Democrat, Assemblyman Richard Carrillo, opposed.

The plate could be subject to litigation, however, from Planned Parenthood, the panel was told by its legal counsel.

Read the whole story

Teachers using phones as a

tool in classrooms

By Daniela Gerson, Los Angeles Times

Priscilla Farinas, an English teacher at Social Justice Humanitas Academy in San Fernando, faced her 31 students recently and made an announcement that seemingly violates official Los Angeles Unifiedpolicy.

"This is the one and only time I will have you take out your cellphones," she said, instructing the students to share their definitions of "privilege" via text message as part of a lesson on "The Great Gatsby."

Students immediately grabbed their mobile devices. Their texts populated a screen in the front of the classroom. Every student appeared focused on their schoolwork.

Farinas wanted to flip the script: Rather than reprimanding her students for using their phones, she wanted to put them to work as a learning tool. She is among a growing number of teachers who are instructing students to use their phones to conduct research, listen to music, calculate math problems or photograph assignments.

Read the whole story

California's working poor grow poorer

By Pauline Bartolone, CalMatters

After a day of picking grapes for $9.25 an hour, Eva Montes waits in line for food aid in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial building in Earlimart, a community of 8,537 people.

"You can't make enough money for what you spend," Montes says in Spanish while waiting with other farmworkers for her number to be called. Today she'll take home a box of bagged greens and other produce distributed by a local non-profit.

"Sometimes, you don't earn enough to buy things for what the children need for school, or food for the house, or personal expenses … like house payments or bills."

Montes is part of a growing economic problem in California: low wage workers are getting poorer, and there are more of them.

There were about 354,800 Californians working full-time and year-round in 2013 living under the federal poverty limit, according to the nonprofit California Budget and Policy Center. That's 3.1 percent of California's full-time workforce, double the rate it was 35 years ago.

Read the whole story

El Nino watch – Pacific Ocean abnormally warm

By Brian K. Sullivan, BloombergBusiness

The Pacific Ocean is warm. Very warm.

Last week, the U.S. Climate Prediction Center announced temperatures reached 5.6 Fahrenheit above normal in a key section of the Pacific called Nino 3.4, touching off a Twitter typhoon among some El Nino watchers alarmed that they were so high. Monday, the agency said readings had edged up to 3.1 degrees above normal.

It’s probably too early to add this to the list of signs of the impending apocalypse. Instead, it’s likely just an indicator that the sea-surface component of El Nino is getting ripe, said Kevin Trenberth, senior scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo.

The weekly readings “are less reliable” than their monthly counterparts, which tend to be a bit cooler, he said. And El Nino isn’t just sea-surface temperatures: It’s also atmospheric changes that upend global weather patterns.

Read the whole story