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Letters : Opinion: A blowout and a movement

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Nearly 50 years ago, there was bipartisan support for environmental legislation. That sounds implausible now, but it was true. And one of its major catalysts was the 1969 Santa Barbara oil blowout.

Jan. 28, 2019, marks the 50th anniversary of the blowout, an avoidable catastrophe that brought between 80,000 to 100,000 barrels of heavy crude oil onto the beaches of Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, affecting tourism, fishing and wildlife for years. It was the worst oil-related disaster the U.S. had experienced to that time and now ranks third behind the 2010 Deepwater Horizon and the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil disasters.

However, the blowout had a surprising political effect. Though not the only precipitating event, in the years following, more environmental legislation was passed than in any other period in U.S. history. It included the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), signed into law by President Richard Nixon and enacted on Jan. 1, 1970; and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, established by Nixon's executive order on Dec., 1970. Though some say Nixon did this for political reasons rather than a concern for the environment, at this point it doesn't matter. It happened.

Nixon's support of environmental legislation did not last long. Two years later, Nixon vetoed the Clean Water Act, but the veto was overruled by both houses of Congress. It became law in 1972.

Less surprising but monumentally significant was the passage of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in 1970. The California Coastal Commission, created in 1972 by the electorate's passage of Proposition 20, was reauthorized by the state Legislature's passage of the Coastal Act in 1976.

Though developers grumble about the burden that regulations impose, the foundation created by these environmental laws has not blocked development. In California, we can say that it has blocked over-development of the coast. Consequently, folks are not prevented from finding their way to the beach. Highway 1 still has beautiful views. Marine reserves are flourishing. The moratorium on new oil leases off the coast still holds, although those old oil rigs are still out there in the Santa Barbara Channel.

But the status quo has been ripped to shreds in California by the effects of climate change. Sea level rise threatens the coast as we have known it, but the devastation and horror inflicted by the wildfires the past two years has been apocalyptic. And seeing such effect creates a conundrum. As much as the state of California is already doing to reduce carbon emissions, the need is for unified global action at unprecedented speed. Without bipartisan support from the U.S. Congress and the president, the prospect of thwarting climate catastrophe is dim.

But follow the dots. If you can't hope for bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress, then one needs majorities in Congress and a Democrat in the White House. The blue wave must continue through massive voter registration and involvement of young people in every state who see their future so threatened by the warming planet.

Californians can support these efforts with funding, plus, for example, putting boots on the ground in their neighboring states of Nevada and Arizona. A more rapid switch to electric cars, public transportation and renewable energy, despite lack of support in D.C., must continue.

The 2018 elections were a good start, but an even greater effort is needed throughout the country to bring the changes that should have happened already.

The anniversary of the oil blowout is good. It reminds us that when people take action, a nightmare can bring positive change. Californians owe such action to the memory of those who died in the fires.

The author is president and co-founder of Earth Alert.

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