

Acceptance speech

by Dr. James Hansen, Tokyo, 26 October 2010

Your Imperial Highnesses Princess and Prince Akishino, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great privilege to speak before you today.

Chairman Tetsuji Tanaka of the Asahi Glass Foundation has written: "The Blue Planet Prize was so named in the hopes that our blue planet will be a shared asset capable of sustaining human life long into the future." We are grateful to the Foundation for its foresight in promoting that goal.

It is an honor to receive this award alongside my longtime colleague Bob Watson, and a pleasure to return to Japan, where I was a student when I began to study the atmospheres of planets.

We scientists must admit that we have not yet informed the public well about climate change, nor have we stimulated governments to take the actions needed to preserve the blue planet.

Our planet is dangerously close to tipping points. Ice is melting worldwide and many species are stressed by climate change and other factors. Global warming, if we allow it to continue, will cause sea level rise, species extinction and increasing climate extremes out of humanity's control.

Stewardship of life on our planet demands action to stabilize climate. Geophysics reveals the requirements: phase out coal, leave tar sands in the ground, do not pursue the last drops of oil.

Yet as long as fossil fuels are the cheapest energy we will burn them, an economic law as certain as the law of gravity.

Solution therefore requires a rising fee on oil, gas and coal, collected from fossil fuel companies. All funds collected must be distributed to the public monthly to allow lifestyle adjustments and stimulate clean energy innovations.

Yet our governments do little or nothing, unwilling to seriously confront the fossil fuel industry.

My country was established on the principle that all people are created equal. That principle led to the concept of equal protection of the laws, a right that is guaranteed by our Constitution.

Today we face a great moral crisis. Human-made climate change pits the rich and powerful against the young and unborn, against the defenseless, and against nature.

The moral issue of intergenerational injustice is comparable to slavery and civil rights. Civil rights were gained when the people went to the streets and the courts backed the people, providing equal protection of the laws and ordering desegregation.

Climate can be stabilized and the remarkable life on our planet can be preserved. But we must demand that governments serve the public and preserve our blue planet.