

OPINION

Diversity of thought is critical for democracy

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TUCSON OPINION

Climate change threatens Arizonans

RICHARD CARMONA

Special to the Arizona Daily Star

The following is the opinion and analysis of the writer:

Over the past three months, Arizonans and the nation have faced three challenges we know well, but the dial on all three seemed to be turned up.

Last month, the federal government declared that the long-standing drought has reduced the Colorado River — and Lake Mead, which feeds it — to new lows, sparking cuts to our water supplies that will hit Arizona farmers in 2022.

As of the end of July, 22 wildfires were burning, fueled by the ongoing drought, and record heat. This year is forecast to be a wildfire season like last year's, one of the worst in a decade.

And in June, we saw a heat wave that set new records, with Tucson hitting 115 degrees and shattering a 125-year-old record,

with new broken temperature records around the state.

We're used to the heat, drought, and the fires here in Arizona, but if it feels like it's getting worse and less predictable, you're right. As the 17th surgeon general of the United States — the "nation's doctor" — I'm concerned because climate change is harming the health of Arizonans. It's costing lives, costing our economy and endangering our future.

If you know someone with asthma or lung disease, these hot days and the smoke from wildfires are making their breathing problems worse. Hotter days and the tiny particles in wildfire smoke don't just impact breathing, it harms people who have heart disease and can cause more premature births.

The air pollution and the poorer air quality that comes in heat waves harms the develop-

ment of our kids and harms the health of our older friends and neighbors.

Yes, we had these problems before and yes, these changes are impacted by several forces. But climate change is magnifying these threats. Every Arizonan is vulnerable to these threats, but some of us are feeling it first and worst: people who work outside, have lower-incomes, have preexisting health conditions, and people of color, including our Indigenous communities.

We can and will do better if our leaders come together on this.

I spent four years as surgeon general in the administration of President George W. Bush and learned a lot about how Washington works — and when it doesn't. What we need now is leaders who set politics aside and look for practical solutions that solve many problems at once and

help us build a better future.

One of those opportunities is before us right now. We can make climate-smart policy and investments to rebuild our infrastructure, starting with improving our roads, buildings and transportation systems. We can support rapidly growing clean, renewable energy — like solar here in Arizona — and the systems, like a renewed and modernized power grid, that can enable us to store and sell this energy to the rest of the country.

We can create a win-win for our health and our economy. Pivoting away from energy that creates heat-trapping pollution will begin to clean our air and water while improving our health now and for the future.

We'll also create an economic boon for Arizona if we help people transition to new jobs and new opportunities that are emerging as we move toward a

healthier future. We can capture our share of the rapid growth in the solar power sector if we make the right choices today.

We need leaders right now who are focused not just on one issue, but on solving the big challenges we face: growing the economy, improving our health, and protecting and innovating for our futures and that of our kids and grandkids.

The health of people in the United States has been my life's work, but at the end of the day I'm a father and a grandfather, and I want my family to breathe easy, grow up safely and prosper in a stable country. I want that for everyone in Arizona and around the world.

Richard Carmona, M.D., M.P. H., FACS was the 17th Surgeon General of the United States and is a distinguished professor at the University of Arizona.