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Community Reactions to Extreme Weather

Abstract: Extreme weather events may provide opportunities to raise public awareness and spur action to address climate change. Using concepts from the study of social movements, the literature on climate change communication and policy studies of focusing events, we conducted surveys and case studies in communities that experienced extreme weather events in the United States to identify under what conditions, and through what mechanisms, the experience of an extreme weather event generates community discussion and collective action linked to climate change. Our findings suggest that extreme events can act as focusing events for awareness and action but not always and not for everyone. Discussion of the role of climate change and policy change post-event were often limited, as the rescue and recovery process can be overwhelming. Most policy actions post-event were focused on adaptation to future extreme events, as opposed to mitigation. Discussions about climate change post-event appeared particularly relevant around events that scientists more readily attributed to climate change, where contextual factors facilitated discussion, and where resources can facilitate action.

Bio: Dr. Hilary Boudet is an Associate Professor and Associate Director of Graduate Programs at the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University. She teaches courses on energy and society, social movements, policy theory and research methods. Her research interests include environmental and energy policy, natural resource sociology, social movements, and public participation in energy and environmental decision-making. Before joining the faculty at Oregon State University, Hilary was a Postdoctoral Scholar at Stanford University, where she managed a community-based intervention with 30 Girl Scout troops aimed at reducing household energy use. She completed her dissertation in Stanford's Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources on the factors and processes shaping community opposition to energy development. She holds a BA in Environmental Engineering and Political Science from Rice University.