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Looking back

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IT'S FALL 2008.

Most outdoor events at the Beijing Olympics were canceled this August due to stifling heat and abysmal air. Populations the world over spilled onto sun-baked streets this summer, escaping baking hovels and failing farms, demanding swift action on climate change. Looking back, it's been a tumultuous year.

Extremes and volatility have become the new norm, as unwieldy winds whipped up over warming seas and lands usher in rapidly shifting fronts.

China had it especially rough this summer. The tragic, aborted Chicago Marathon in September 2007 proved prescient while the warnings of the International Olympic Committee president, Jacques Rogge, proved prophetic: In China, dust storms lifting off expanding deserts, mixed with black soot and brown haze from proliferating coal-fired power plants, were now laced with snowlike drifts of pollen from poplars that ring Beijing. (The trees were planted to filter the incoming air; but elevated CO₂ boosts ragweed and poplar pollen production.)

Runners could not run; jumpers could not jump. The massive business interruption cascaded through global financial markets.

In the land down under, dense drought has deepened. This summer, Australia - like southern Europe this past August - was again inflamed by wildfires.

But facing problems head-on can cede solutions: Australia is scaling up solar power to desalinate sea water.

In North America, advancing bark beetles have shredded western forests, as forest fires, sparked by lightning, fueled by lifeless limbs and fanned by fickle winds exact a mounting toll on animals, humans, property, air quality, and watersheds send pulses of carbon amplifying global warming.

This September Arctic ice reached yet another nadir. But perhaps the sudden discharge of Greenland outlet glaciers this past August will bring a modicum of cool relief? Perhaps, too, the cold jolt we seem to need to take bold steps into the clean energy transition?

This fall a confluence of concerns has nourished a welcome convergence of agendas. "Peak oil" - after which oil sources decline - turned out to be closer in the mirror than it first appeared, and food prices climbed steeply as crops-for-fuel displaced crops-for-food and feed and fiber, and monopolized monocultures carved deep gouges into pristine forests.

Last summer's credit crunch left an economic scar. The good news is that Wall Street now views real wealth as more secure than money chasing paper money, and is shifting significant funds into renewable energy, resource efficiency and forest preservation.

But, Washington - still firmly in the grip of a handful of companies holding fast to fossil fuels - will still not give the market the signals, incentives and the infrastructure needed to launch what promises to be the new clean engine of global economic growth.

Finally, the 2008 elections are upon us.

Some candidates are calling for an end to the era of oil as a necessary step for peace with one another and with nature. A courageous few are proposing a huge investment in our common future.

Looking back, we can wonder . . . just how much closer to solutions would we have been if we had moved ahead, full

speed, just a year ago?

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