

# Tallahassee.350

As the 47 students and I rode home in February from the Power Shift 2009 conference in Washington, D.C., we talked about ways we might bring into action some of the ideas we'd been exposed to at the conference. Thus began plans to make something happen in Tallahassee and the rest of Florida.

At one of the sessions, we heard environmental champion Bill McKibben speak about plans for [International Day of Climate Action](#) on Oct. 24, 2009. The goal of that action was to get as many people around the world as possible to hold teach-ins, marches, prayer vigils, parades or any other type of event that would draw the attention of citizens, the media and elected officials to the pressing need to address global climate change. The date was selected in advance of the [United Nations Climate Change Conference](#) Dec. 7-18 in Copenhagen.

The theme for International Day of Climate Action was "350," which stands for 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide, the [level scientists have determined the earth can sustain](#) and maintain human life as we know it. Unfortunately, we are at about 390 ppm and rising.



A group of students met in June with Jackie Hightower, co-adviser of the FAMU Green Coalition, and me to discuss the Coalition's plans for the coming year. Oct. 24, as it turned out, also was FAMU's homecoming. We had great hopes of doing several things on campus in support of the 350 initiative. But the only project that materialized was a plastic bottle recycling competition the two weeks before the homecoming game.

In August, I called a meeting to see if anyone was interested in a citywide event; 16 people showed up, representing FAMU, FSU, the city and county, Leon County Schools, the Leon County Extension Service, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tallahassee and Sustainable Tallahassee. I shared the idea with anyone who would listen. Many people said they were interested, but no one had the time to co-lead the project. So I did it myself, with the help of many people who selflessly gave of their time, money and talents.

The result was "Tallahassee 350," which was one of about 5,200 events in 181 countries to recognize [International Day of Climate Action](#). We held our event at Lake Ella just north of downtown. We officially started at 3 p.m., with several booths promoting recycling, solar energy and other sustainability initiatives. At 3:15 p.m., I introduced our speakers: City Commissioner Gil Ziffer, County Commissioner Akin Akinyemi, asthma specialist Dr. Ron Saff, family practitioner Dr. John Ness, and FSU scientist Dr. Vincent Salters. Representative Michelle Rehwinkle Vaslinda joined us later.

At 3:50 p.m., we circled the green near the gazebo and sang "[This Little Earth's Alive](#)" to the tune of "This Little Light of Mine." Rev. Warren Clark in Tampa and I wrote the lyrics. He and I were part of a loose group of about a dozen people statewide who had been talking weekly and sharing ideas about our respective 350 activities. About 40 separate events were held throughout Florida.

And then about 4 p.m., we created a human 3-5-0, holding up green, yellow and red lyric sheets to help create the image. We sent our photo to 350.org, which posted [more than 22,000 images online](#) from events around the world.



*ABOVE: Booths offered advice, information and items to buy.*

*BELOW: Speakers included Commissioners Akinyemi and Ziffer, and Drs. Salter, Saff and Donnellan.*



*At 3:50 p.m., participants sang "This Little Earth's Alive."*



*More than 100 people, holding their colored lyric sheets, formed a human 3-5-0. (Photo by Bob O'Lary)*

Was it a success? We were competing with several major events on the same day: FAMU's homecoming, the Stone Crab Festival, the Farmers Market, a county recycling event, a city solar panel display, an open house at the Extension Service, a tour of organic farms, the annual Greek Food Festival and more. And yet, more than 100 people chose to attend our event at Lake Ella, including about a dozen students from Chiles High School. So in terms of participation, yes, it was a success.

In terms of getting attention by the media, I was able to get an [op-ed piece](#) printed in the Tallahassee Democrat on Oct. 23, in which I discussed climate change and described the purpose of International Day of Climate Action. Many people told me they had read my opinion piece, and about a dozen e-mailed me their feedback (including comments from a few climate change deniers). We got a nice story in advance on our local public radio station, and the VPR reporter showed up at the event. And the Democrat printed a photo and long caption about the event the following day. While we would have loved more media coverage, we got our share.

We secured more than 60 signatures to our petition, which demanded leaders focus on clean energy alternatives and cut carbon emissions. I mailed copies of those petitions to our state and national elected officials. And we encouraged everyone to call our Senators, asking them to support a climate bill. Democrats voted to bring the bill to the Senate floor for debate; Republicans voted against it. It's sad climate change has become politicized.

As a followup to [International Day of Climate Action](#), I was asked to lead an art project in support of the 1 Sky initiative. Members of my small group ministry at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tallahassee painted a mural that became one of hundreds given to President Barack Obama, urging him to attend the United National Climate Change Conference Dec. 7-18 in Copenhagen.

So will we and the millions of people around the world be successful in getting our leaders to seriously tackle climate change this next year? Research shows U.S. Americans are less persuaded than citizens of other countries about the urgency of addressing climate change. We need to wake up in this country and act now. It's a matter of life and death.



*.UUCT'ers Joanne Taylor Michele Hope, Miryam Rubenstein and Pat Riedell create a mural for the 1 Sky project.*

## **‘Tallahassee 350’: Taking a Stand on Global Climate Change**

By LaRae Donnellan

Imagine a car is racing recklessly toward you and your children as you stroll along a street in your neighborhood. You can see the danger. So you’re able to pull your children to safety just in the nick of time.

But what if that car is three blocks away and around the corner? It’s still moving toward you and will eventually overtake you, but because you don’t feel any imminent danger, you continue your stroll. You might even be singing to your children and not paying attention to the traffic ... until it is too late to get out of the way.

That’s what global climate change is like. It is moving quickly toward us, but because we often can’t see how climate change affects us, personally, it’s easy to ignore. Will we “see” it in time to act appropriately and save ourselves and our children?

A certain level of greenhouse gas is necessary to keep the Earth warm enough for human life: About 275 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) has been the average for most of human existence. But about 200 years ago (think Industrial Revolution), the level started climbing rapidly as we burned fossil fuels such as oil and coal to heat our homes, power our vehicles and run our businesses. Today, the [level of CO<sub>2</sub> is about 390 ppm and rising](#).

This rise in greenhouse gases is the metaphorical reckless car barreling down on us. If we don’t do something to stop this rise in greenhouse gases, we’re toast. Literally and figuratively.

Scientists tell us that we need to [get back to 350 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> no later than mid-century](#). We have a chance to make this happen if we can persuade world leaders at the U.N. Climate Change Conference Dec. 7-18 in Copenhagen to commit to cutting worldwide carbon emissions and transforming the way we obtain and use energy.

On Saturday, Oct. 24, International Day of Climate Action, millions of people around the world will be gathering, marching, singing, praying, talking, petitioning and otherwise raising their voices to tell our elected and appointed officials to cut our carbon emissions to 350 ppm.

Locally, we’re holding “Tallahassee 350” from 3-5 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 24, at Lake Ella. You can get a free compact fluorescent light bulb from the City, hear from experts about climate change, sing a song at 3:50 p.m. (along with hundreds of others throughout the state), and create a human 3-5-0 at 4 p.m. Come join us. [To see what’s happening across Florida and around the world, go to [www.350.org](http://www.350.org).]

What does global climate change look like? Here are a few examples:

- Weather patterns have changed dramatically in recent years – and we’re not just talking about simple cyclical changes. Remember what the weather was like last summer? In 2003, about 35,000 people died in Europe during the summer heat wave. [California’s wildfires are being made worse](#) by rising temperatures, drought and snowpack runoff.
- Trees absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. However, we are losing about 36 football fields worth of forests EVERY MINUTE. [Deforestation is responsible for about 18% of greenhouse gas emissions](#).
- People are getting sick from the consequences of global climate change. Vector-borne (e.g., mosquitoes) diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever, are [moving further northward](#). More than 200,000 children in Florida suffer from asthma caused by air pollution; in 2008, Leon County ranked worst in the state for annual particle pollution.
- More than 20 million people have been forcibly displaced, and more than \$100 billion worth of damage is [caused annually by global climate change](#).

- [Low-income people and people of color suffer more than others from global climate change](#). In this country, more African Americans than non-Hispanic whites live closer to coal-fired plants and to shorelines threatened by hurricanes and rising sea level. Blacks have a 150-200% higher rate of heat deaths and a 36% higher rate of asthma than do non-Hispanic whites. It's not genetic; it's environmental.
- We use nonrenewable petroleum and natural gas to create plastic – which takes forever to break down. In the U.S., we throw away [2.5 million plastic bottles PER HOUR](#) and about [8 billion pounds of plastic bags](#), wraps and sacks annually. Plastic seems cheap ... until we look at the REAL environmental, social, health and economic costs of our choices.
- By investing \$150 billion a year in clean, renewable energy, we can [create 1.7 million new jobs](#) – far more than an equivalent investment in fossil fuels. Cleaner energy means less carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

Senators Bill Nelson and George LeMieux and Representative Allen Boyd: We need you to support a strong climate bill – in advance of the U.N. climate meeting in December – that sets a goal of 350 ppm of CO2 and other greenhouse gases, and that promotes development of renewable energy.

Governor Charlie Crist and state legislators: We need you to take a strong stand against drilling for oil off our coast, pass a meaningful renewable portfolio standard, and vote for wide-scale energy efficiency instead of hugely expensive nuclear reactors.

The consequences of ignoring global climate change are oh-so-very real. What will we say to our children and their children's children if we do nothing to move them from harm's way? That we didn't know? That we were too busy?

But we DO know. And we must act. Now.

See you at Lake Ella on Oct. 24!