Why I Care About Climate Change

By Lou Vontver, MD, MEd, retired OB/GYN

My youth was spent in ranching and oil production communities, with very low population density. Water was highly valued, and the grazing allotment was approximately 30 to 35 acres per animal unit. I also saw how some facilities could pollute huge areas. In the early 1960s, following medical school and internship, I had planned to be a family practitioner in a small town in Montana or Wyoming. However, a three-year tour stationed in Japan with the U.S. Air Force offered an interesting event regarding nuclear power during the Cuban missile crisis, as well as travel in overpopulated and, in some cases, extremely poor parts of the world. The experience was life changing.

The birth control pill had just come on the market, and was hoped to offer some help with overpopulation and high childhood mortality, particularly in the developing world. Several organizations set up family planning clinics in India, and women were walking for miles to attend. Unexpectedly, many of these women came because they were infertile, and wanted to have five or six children so that at least two of them would be alive to care for them in their old age. Until these women believed that their children would live, they didn’t want contraception. Because I was interested in this problem, I applied for, and received, a reproductive endocrinology fellowship at the University of Washington, which led to an OB/GYN residency, appointment to the faculty, a MEd degree, and the job of running the student program for our department. I maintained my interest in reproductive rights, population, and environmental influences, and continued looking for more information about them to add to the curriculum, as I wanted the students to be aware of them as well.

In 1977 President Jimmy Carter directed the Council of Environmental Quality and the Department of State together with other appropriate agencies, to produce a one-year study of the probable changes in population, natural resources and environment that would occur by the end of the century. The resulting publication was Global 2000. It consisted of three volumes: an executive summary, which stated conclusions, and two other volumes about data that had been analyzed. I was most interested in the projected population of the world (10 billion people by year 2030), and concerned about the forces that decreased environmental resources needed to sustain that number, such as loss of land due to erosion, building roads and cities, desertification, loss of forests, water shortages, ozone depletion, increased atmospheric CO2, and the need for energy. The projections in Global 2000 have turned out to be eerily accurate. I have been intermittently reading about these topics ever since, and appreciate the opportunity to be a little more active in doing something about them.