Fireside Chat: The Nuclear Weapons and Climate Change

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Panelists: Fireside chat between Gael Tarleton, WAND Board member, and former Washington state legislator; and Brian Toon, Professor, Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Problem: Climate change is setting the stage for drought, food insecurity, and massive population displacement which could spur deadly armed conflicts over critical resources. Just a few nuclear weapons detonations in a regional conflict would cool the planet by 2 to 5 degrees Celsius and cause mass starvation for over a decade. As nations look to transition to clean and renewable energy in an effort to address the impending climate crisis, nuclear energy and the dangers around its production and use, must be a part of the climate conversation.

Based on the conversation, our panelists had the following policy recommendations:

- **Support efforts to reduce federal defense and nuclear spending.** We need to stop the useless build-up of nuclear weapons. There's no one, no matter their political beliefs, that wants nuclear war or wants a nuclear power plant to be destabilized. Everyone wants basically the same thing—high quality of life, good health, equitable pay for work, etc. — which means that we should and can find ways to achieve these universal goals. The impact of nuclear war between Russia and the United States would create the largest climate shift since the extinction of the dinosaurs. We need to get rid of ground-based weapons and land-based missiles so no one person has to decide whether or not to start a nuclear war.

- **Emphasize the massive impact of nuclear weapons.** The impact of nuclear weapons is best seen in the most extreme cases. The scale of impact helps us see the real consequences of nuclear action in real life. It is very dangerous to expose the environment to chemical materials that have long lifetimes—the hole in the ozone layer is the result of seemingly neutral chemicals that have incredibly long lives and accumulate in the atmosphere.