Testimony
U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
"An Examination of the Effects of Global Warming
on the Chesapeake Bay"
September 26, 2007
Richard Edmund

Thank you Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is Richard Edmund, and I am the pastor of the three United Methodist Churches on Smith Island, Maryland.

When I reveal to others the other panelists here today, folks ask, "Why did they ask you?" I know I am here to tell the story of Smith Island, Maryland, located across from the mouth of the Potomac River surrounded by waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Our population is about 225 people spread among 3 communities of Ewell, Rhodes Point, and Tylerton. Almost all of the families depend on working on the water for their livelihood.

Because of our geographical location we are likely most vulnerable to the effects of a rising sea level. Most of the dwellings are just a couple of feet above an abnormally high tide or a storm surge from a hurricane. In 2003 Hurricane Isabel storm surge came into a few of the houses and covered most of the inhabitable land, and all of the marsh area.

We are also fighting the effects of erosion as waves gradually wear down the shoreline. The recent work by this Senate Committee and corresponding members of the House side, are greatly appreciated in getting Smith Island included in the Water Resources Development Act. Thank you!

I know this Committee is interested in what effects global warming is having on our Island. I have been the pastor there since 2000 and it is difficult to attribute changes I have seen to any one cause. I am not a scientist, and so I will let them discuss the role of climate change on the Chesapeake Bay. But I am involved in the daily lives of the people who have lived on Smith Island for generations.

Here is what they tell me:

1. some houses that never or rarely have water in the yards at unusually high tides, now often experience that.

2. We do not have the winter snows or freezes that is within the memory of many of the long time Islanders. Most winters the total snowfall is often less than 6 inches.

3. The number of crabs and oysters available to the watermen are much less than what they used to be.

4. There is wildlife present there now that didn't use to be there. The most obvious example is the brown pelican. About a dozen years ago these birds began flying this far north, and now they have a nesting area just south of Smith Island on the border with Virginia.

The independent people of our communities have been toughened over the years of fighting the elements of nature. Despite difficult times in the watermen industry, folks are determined to stay there until forced to leave by the economy or the environment. Twenty five years ago, experts were saying we wouldn't be here in 25 years. The Island theology is summed up in a stained glass window in one of the churches which shows a building on a rocky island with waves lapping at the shoreline, with the words, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" across the top. As one Islander, Jennings Evans, summed it up, "We'll be here as long as the Lord wants us here."

But reports of potential sea level rises are daunting. I know several of you have been to Greenland recently and have seen first hand the beginning of a large scale meltdown. It is hard to imagine that process being reversed with the increase in global temperatures we are seeing. I have heard the figure of a 23 foot increase in sea level if the entire ice sheet would melt. Of course a rise of 3 feet would likely be the end of practical living on Smith Island and other areas around the Bay. A recent movie about the potential for destruction caused by global warming was entitled, "We Are All Smith Islanders." The effects will be felt on our communities first, but all of us are vulnerable to the results in some way. Smith Island is, in the oft used phrase, "The canary in the coal mine."

In 1813 one of the future members of your Chamber, Army General William Henry Harrison, received a war report from US Navy Commodore

Oliver Perry after the Battle of Lake Erie: "We have met the enemy and he is ours." For Earth Day 1970 Walt Kelly changed one word in order to pinpoint whom needs to defeated with the relatively insignificant problems of pollution and trash back then, and gave Pogo the famous quote, "We have met the enemy and he is us." It is our desire that this Committee and other bodies who have decision making abilities would take action as quickly as possible to slow down the effects that more and more each day seem certain to occur.

On a trip down the Susquehanna River one year a man in Wilkes-Barre Pennsylvania, asked me "Are they mad at us down there?" He wondered if the folks living where I was then doing ministry on the South River, just inland of the Thomas Point Lighthouse on the Bay, were angry at the acid mine drainage, runoff, and other pollutants that have come down the River over the last century. I replied, "No, they just want to have the Bay cleaner now." But the larger question is will the future generations, downstream in time, be mad at us in this time period for not doing more to stem the changes that seem inevitable now.

One of the reasons I'm glad I'm here today is that my four oldest grandchildren are here. One day somewhere around the middle of this century, I hope they will tell their grandchildren, one day back in September of 2007, "Pa", your great great grandfather, talked to men and women about trying to stop what has happened to our planet because of global warming. I want them to know that I did what I could. Members of the Committee, I hope you will do the same.

Thank you.