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Smoky Seattle: The Cost of Climate Change

Emma Ferguson, Staff Reporter

As Seattle experiences its driest and warmest summer in decades, the city's smoky skyline is a reminder of the looming threat of climate change.

Seattle has been an example of urban sustainability for cities across the country. A prime example of such is being the first U.S. city to establish a carbon neutral electric utility, one of the reasons it was dubbed one of the Greenest U.S. Cities by Insider.

"Seattle is a major leader in climate change and sustainability," John Armstrong, an assistant professor of environmental studies at Seattle University, said.

Seattle's former mayor, Jenny Durkan, introduced the Green New Deal in 2020, combining efforts by all municipal departments to advance shared goals in creating a more sustainable city.

"Anything that you can do to get fewer people driving their own cars—building up public transportation, incentivizing its use, increasing bike lanes and walkability, zoning decisions to try and let people live and work closer together—can all have a pretty big effect in terms of emissions of greenhouse gasses, as well as other pollutants that are important for local air quality issues," Armstrong said.

Similarly to the city's environmental efforts, Seattle U students have created clubs and organizations aiming to make the campus more sustainable. The Sustainable Student Action (SSA) club was involved with getting Seattle U to divest from fossil fuels, a process that began in 2018.

"We were the first Jesuit University to do that, and our club pushed that into action through several generations of people in the club," Aoife Kennedy, a second year environmental studies major and president of SSA, said.



Image courtesy of Eric Zhang

Continuing their goal to make Seattle U more environmentally friendly, SSA is working with organizations like Generation Conscious, which works to create more sustainable job opportunities, and Killer Coke, which partners with universities across the U.S. to stop purchasing from Coca-Cola which employs unethical behavior while creating its products. The club began a petition demanding that the university cut their contract with the company in 2023.

Other projects students can see include the rain garden, which was built outside of the Bellarmine Hall residence by the Engineers for a Sustainable World (ESW) club earlier this quarter.

“Essentially, the rain garden collects dirty runoff water,” Second-year Computer Science and Finance major Barabara Makowski, the interim president for ESW, said. “So on a rainy day, that rain that’s falling, our garden collects it, purifies it and sends it down the drain.”

Makowski, a second-year computer science and finance double major, has several more projects planned in cooperation with different departments on campus, like Grounds and Landscaping.

“We’re hopefully going to start making our own compost for a hydroponics project we have going on,” Makowski said. “We want to work on the edible garden boxes by Chardin that have been left to themselves, and we’ve been volunteering with St. James Cathedral Garden.”

Beyond action on campus, student activists who are eligible to vote are looking to make a difference at the polls with concerns about climate change. Armstrong emphasized the importance of a citizen’s relationship with their elected officials as a route for environmental justice.

“Cities and the policymakers there are responsive to residents,” Armstrong said. “One of the most important things that we can all do is engage on the issues that matter to us. If more people do that, then there’ll be more prioritization of climate change and sustainability, as well as the related environmental justice and social justice issues.”

With midterm elections at the end of the month, Armstrong noted that now is the optimal time to be paying attention to local policymakers and their plans in further addressing the concerns that have arisen due to climate change.

“Make sure you’re registered to vote. Go out there and get involved in campaigns,” Armstrong said.

As both citizens of Seattle and members of the university, the Seattle U community is prioritizing environmental protection. Student-led efforts to improve sustainability manifest in many ways across campus, from clubs and organizations to projects and petitions.