CLIMATE CHANGE: COMING SOON TO A REGION NEAR YOU:

This past week, people all across America drove miles to see "The Day after Tomorrow," Roland Emmerich's new blockbuster disaster movie about global climate change. I didn't go, mostly because I don't like crowds, but also because I know that driving to the movie theater would have dumped many pounds of greenhouse gas into the air. I know that by the time the movie comes out on video, planet Earth will already be warmer.

The movie's title brought to mind an old James Bond movie called "Tomorrow Never Dies." I thought, if tomorrow never dies, then the day after tomorrow will never come, which means that none of us will ever have to worry about climate change. This, of course, is major denial. So, I thought, if Emmerich and his producers were really serious about a public response to climate change, they would have picked the title "The Day After Today," which sounds more urgent. But that might have raised everyone's blood pressure. It might have caused the multiplex throng to actually think about their energy habits, perhaps even prompting them to do something really stupid like skip the drive to the theater. God forbid. That would be bad for ticket sales.

On second thought, Hollywood is a whole lot smarter about popular culture than I am. Maybe they have a sequel in mind, a secret plan to introduce the notion of climate change with the fictional "The Day After Tomorrow," then follow it up with a more truthful documentary called "The Day After Today." Maybe the movie moguls really are good guys after all, out to save us from ourselves.

Back to present reality. As I write this on Tuesday, June 1, it's a cloudy, wet, cool morning. Earlier, while driving my son to his car-pool rendezvous, I heard on the radio that the East had been hit with severe storms, one of which spawned a swath of damaging tornadoes. This didn't surprise me in the slightest. Why? Because this morning's weather -- cloudy, wet, stormy, cool -- is completely consistent with the actual climate change scenarios for the northeastern United States.

I learned about the real climate trends a few years ago, while teaching a course on global climate change to University of Connecticut undergraduates. My students and I read the same texts, one of which was a report by the U.S. government (hardly a radical environmental organization) titled "Climate Change Impacts on the United States." Three mornings a week for 14 weeks, we discussed the reasons why and how our climate has changed from lush tropical to icy-cold conditions. We also tried to distinguish the role played by greenhouse gas emissions from those due to natural causes. Near the end of the semester, we examined climate models predicting that New England will likely become wetter, rather than drier, and probably cloudier as well. We learned that warming would be easiest to measure as a rise in winter minimum temperatures but most notably experienced as a greater number of scorching hot summer days. We learned to expect a slow rise in sea level, an increase in storminess and climate surprises.

Could it be that global climate change is already here, having arrived before June 1 not with Hollywood flair, but with a vengeance of the slow, creeping kind? Could it be that the most important changes we face won't be as dramatic as the movie, but instead will be annoying and expensive adjustments to our quality of life? The answer is yes. But that makes for boring, uncomfortable theater.

On balance, "The Day After Tomorrow" is probably a good thing for the environment. My one fear, however, is that it will be seen as a Chicken Little story, rather than the wake-up call it is. For those of you who don't know this children's story, Chicken Little ran around squawking, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" when all that actually fell was a nut from a tree. If people see
the movie but go outside, look up and sees nothing dramatic, they might dismiss it as exaggeration and just keep on truckin' with profligate energy use.

There is no harm in driving to a fun family movie. The real problem is that theaters are too big, which makes them too far away, and that there isn't enough corporate incentive and political will to help us burn less gasoline in our cars. After all, there's always tomorrow. Or is it today?