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New climate report fuels calls for action in W.Va.

By Ken Ward Jr.

A major new report detailing how climate change is already disrupting the nation's weather, communities and commerce is bringing more calls for West Virginia leaders to focus on addressing global warming pollution and diversifying the economy in the state's coalfields.

The National Climate Assessment warns that summers are already longer and hotter and that rains are already coming in heavier downpours. Americans are experiencing longer and more severe seasonal allergies, while plants and birds that thrive in gardens and neighborhoods are changing, the report says.

More dramatic impacts include more frequent flooding in coastal communities and along larger rivers, earlier wildfires produced in part by hotter and drier weather, along with sea-level rises and autumn storms that bring more erosion, the 841-page report says

"Climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present," said the report, written and reviewed by a team of 300 scientists and required by a 1990 law signed by then-President George H.W. Bush.

The report says "aggressive and sustained greenhouse gas emissions reductions by the United States and by other nations" would be needed to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

Among other findings, the report projects that Southwestern West Virginia could experience more than 60 additional days per year above 90 degrees by 2050, compared to the end of the 1900s, if greenhouse emissions continue to increase. That projection compares to an estimate of 15 additional days above 95 degrees included in a draft report made public in January 2013. The increased frequency, intensity, and duration of heat waves "will affect the region's vulnerable agriculture and ecosystems," the report says.

Also, the report projects that mountainous regions in West Virginia could experience "more intense precipitation events" that will "mean greater flood risk, particularly in valleys, where people, infrastructure, and agriculture tend to be concentrated."

"The National Climate Assessment is important, but West Virginians don't have to look to Washington to understand the reality of climate change," said Tom Rodd, a leader of the West Virginia Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative. "West Virginia gardeners, farmers, hunters, scientists, government officials, and more are already seeing the damaging impacts of climate change — including increased flooding and extreme weather like derechos."

Rodd's organization is sponsoring a meeting June 7 at Blackwater Falls State Park to try to jump-start a West Virginia discussion about climate change impacts and potential action plans.

"West Virginians need to have more science-based conversations about the impacts of climate change, where we share our experiences and observations," Rodd said. "If we do that, our citizens, businesses, and government can work together and protect our state, our nation — and our world."

Obama administration officials were vigorously promoting the release of the new climate report, hoping it would spur more public support for actions such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's plans to limit carbon dioxide emissions from power plants.

The report warns of huge costs for dealing with unabated climate change. Responding to sea level rise and flooding alone could cost the economy \$325 billion by 2100, the report says. Heat and drought during 2011 and 2012 contributed to \$10 billion in farm losses alone.

“This National Climate Assessment is the loudest and clearest alarm bell to date signaling the need to take urgent action to combat the threats to Americans from climate change,” John Holdren, the president's top science adviser, told reporters during a Tuesday conference call.

Industry groups weren't impressed. The American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, made up of the nation's largest coal producers, utilities and related companies, accused the White House of resorting to “unsubstantiated scare tactics and hyperbole instead of engaging in a serious discussion about the costs and long-term economic consequences posed by rash federal regulations.”

In West Virginia on Tuesday, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin and other state and local leaders joined with the coal industry for another in a series of meetings, this one in Logan County, to promote opposition to the EPA's plans.

“Clearly, this nation needs to maintain its current levels of coal-fired electric generation, and I believe we need to be investing in new, more modern coal-fired plants,” Rep. Nick J. Rahall, D-W.Va., said at that event. “If this administration wants to do away with coal, it's going to have to come through us to do it.”

The event, promoted by the state-funded Coal Forum organization, included the ceremonial signing of emissions legislation that urges “less stringent performance standards” and “longer compliance schedules” to protect coal-fired power plants.

That legislation is based in part on a state position paper that proposes to reverse the EPA's 2009 “endangerment finding” — a major underpinning of the agency's regulatory efforts — by arguing that there's no proof that greenhouse gases threaten public health.

However, the new federal report explains that climate change “threatens human health and well-being in many ways,” including impacts from increased extreme weather events, wildfires, decreased air quality, threats to mental health, and illnesses transmitted by food, water, and disease-carriers such as mosquitoes and ticks.

Ironically, the new climate assessment notes that key parts of the nation's energy system — including transportation and water supplies needed for coal-fired power generation — are under pressure from severe weather that's related to climate change.

Jeremy Richardson, a West Virginia native who works on climate change issues for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said he hopes the National Climate Assessment's findings could help move the state's discussion away from simply fighting EPA regulations.

“In West Virginia, we might be inclined to think that these impacts are limited to rising sea level along the coasts, but we really will feel the impacts from a changing climate in our own backyard, as well — in the form of more frequent heavy precipitation in the mountains and more frequent heat waves,” Richardson said. “Instead of denying the problem, our elected leaders and industry backers need to recognize that coal use is one of the major drivers of climate change.”

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