



URL: <http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20140426/GZ01/140429349>

Meeting spotlights climate change in W.Va.'s Allegheny Highlands

By Ken Ward Jr.

Scientists, public-policy experts, lawyers and environmental activists are gathering in early June to better understand how climate change puts West Virginia's highlands at risk and what the state's residents and political leaders can do about it.

In what organizers hope is a groundbreaking event, the West Virginia Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative is hosting a June 6-8 meeting at Blackwater Falls State Park. It's called, "Climate Change and the Highlands: What's at Stake — What's at Risk?"

"The economy and ecology of West Virginia's Allegheny Highlands region — home to iconic landscapes like the Blackwater Canyon and Canaan Valley — are closely tied to the region's distinctive high-mountain climate," states a flyer advertising the event.

Featured speakers will include well-known climatologist and West Virginia native Lonnie Thompson, former utility executive and former West Virginia University Institute of Technology President Charles Bayless, and longtime Marshall University biologist Thomas Pauley.

Tom Rodd, a lawyer and activist who has worked on environmental, consumer and social-justice issues across West Virginia for years, is organizing the meeting. Most of the sessions are planned for Saturday, June. 7.

Rodd said it will be the first public event focusing on specific impacts of climate change on West Virginia, and especially in the Allegheny Highlands.

"We are going to look at the impacts and risks from climate change to the economy and ecology of one of the most precious — and temperature-sensitive — areas of our state," Rodd said. "People all over America are starting to have these kinds of 'climate impacts' events, whether it be climate-caused sea-level rise on the coasts or drought in the West. People are thinking locally about a global problem, which I think is good."

Internationally, scientists continue to increase their warnings about the potential impacts of climate change on humanity. The latest U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change again reported that evidence of warming is "unequivocal," that impacts of climate change are already evident and caused by human activity and that huge reductions in greenhouse pollution are necessary, to avoid the worst effects.

In West Virginia, many political leaders continue to reject or ignore such scientific findings, argue against action to reduce emissions or downplay the seriousness of the issue.

Rodd said it's time for a more frank and honest discussion that looks at local impacts and local solutions.

“West Virginians are great people, and we deserve more than just being misled and then cast aside as America and the world deal with the challenge of climate change,” Rodd said. “We need to be part of the conversation, and part of the solution.”

For more information about the event, call 304-345-7663 or visit the event website, <http://www.wvalleghenyclimate.org/index.html>.

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