

Federal report: Warming disrupts Americans' lives (Update 2)

May 6 2014, by Seth Borenstein



This March 13, 2014 file photo shows cracks in the dry bed of the Stevens Creek Reservoir in Cupertino, Calif. The Obama administration is more certain than ever that global warming is changing Americans' daily lives and will worsen—conclusions that scientists will detail in a massive federal report to be released Tuesday, May 6, 2014. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Most Americans are already feeling man-made global warming, from heat waves to wild storms to longer allergy seasons. And it is likely to get worse and more expensive, says a new federal report that is heating up

political debate along with the temperature.

Shortly after the report came out Tuesday, President Barack Obama used several television weathermen to make his point about the bad weather news and a need for action to curb carbon pollution before it is too late.

"We want to emphasize to the public, this is not some distant problem of the future. This is a problem that is affecting Americans right now," Obama told "Today" show weathercaster Al Roker. "Whether it means increased flooding, greater vulnerability to drought, more severe wildfires—all these things are having an impact on Americans as we speak."

Climate change's assorted harms "are expected to become increasingly disruptive across the nation throughout this century and beyond," the National Climate Assessment concluded, emphasizing the impact of too-wild weather as well as simple warming.

Still, it's not too late to prevent the worst of climate change, says the 840-page report, which the Obama administration is highlighting as it tries to jump-start often-stalled efforts to curb heat-trapping gases. Said White House science adviser John Holdren: "It's a good-news story about the many opportunities to take cost-effective actions to reduce the damage."

Release of the report, the third edition of a congressionally mandated study, gives Obama an opportunity to ground his campaign against climate change in science and numbers, endeavoring to blunt the arguments of those who question the idea and human contributions to such changes. Later this summer, the administration plans to propose new regulations restricting gases that come from existing coal-fired power plants.

Not everyone is persuaded.

Some fossil energy groups, conservative think tanks and Republican senators immediately assailed the report as "alarmist." Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Obama was likely to "use the platform to renew his call for a national energy tax. And I'm sure he'll get loud cheers from liberal elites—from the kind of people who leave a giant carbon footprint and then lecture everybody else about low-flow toilets."



In this Aug. 24, 1992 file photo, a sailboat sits on a sidewalk at Dinner Key in Miami after it was washed ashore by Hurricane Andrew. Global warming is rapidly turning America into a stormy and dangerous place, with rising seas and disasters upending lives from flood-stricken Florida to the wildfire-ravaged West, the National Climate Assessment concluded Tuesday, May 6, 2014. (AP Photo/Terry Renna, File)

Since taking office, Obama has not proposed a specific tax on fossil fuel emissions. He has proposed a system that caps emissions and allows companies to trade carbon pollution credits, but it has failed in Congress.

Republican Sen. David Vitter said the report was supposed to be scientific but "it's more of a political one used to justify government overreach." And leaders in the fossil fuel industry, which is responsible for a large amount of the heat-trapping carbon dioxide, said their energy is needed and America can't afford to cut back.

"Whether you agree or disagree with the report, the question is: What are you going to do about it? To us that is a major question," said Charlie Drevna, president of the American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers. He called the report "overblown."

The report—which is full of figures, charts and other research-generated graphics—includes 3,096 footnotes referring to other mostly peer-reviewed research. It was written by more than 250 scientists and government officials, starting in 2012. A draft was released in January 2013, but this version has been reviewed by more scientists, including twice by the National Academy of Sciences which called it "reasonable," and "a valuable resource."



This Oct. 31, 2012 aerial file photo shows destruction in the wake of Superstorm Sandy in Seaside Heights, N.J. Global warming is rapidly turning America into a stormy and dangerous place, with rising seas and disasters upending lives from flood-stricken Florida to the wildfire-ravaged West, according to a new U.S. federal scientific report released Tuesday, May 6, 2014. (AP Photo/Mike Groll, File)

Environmental groups praised the report. "If we don't slam the brakes on the carbon pollution driving climate change, we're dooming ourselves and our children to more intense heat waves, destructive floods and storms and surging sea levels," said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Scientists and the White House called it the most detailed and U.S.-focused scientific report on global warming.

The report looks at regional and state-level effects of global warming,

compared with recent reports from the United Nations that lumped all of North America together.

"All Americans will find things that matter to them in this report," said scientist Jerry Melillo of the Marine Biological Laboratory, who chaired the science committee that wrote it. "For decades we've been collecting the dots about climate change; now we're connecting those dots."



In this Feb. 2, 2011 file photo, hundreds of cars are seen stranded on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. Global warming is rapidly turning America the beautiful into America the stormy, sneezy and dangerous, according to a new U.S. federal scientific report released Tuesday, May 6, 2014. (AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato)

In a White House conference call with reporters, National Climatic Data Center Director Tom Karl said his two biggest concerns were flooding from sea level rise on the U.S. coastlines—especially for the low-lying

cities of Miami, Norfolk, Virginia, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire—and drought, heat waves and prolonged fire seasons in the Southwest.

Even though the nation's average temperature has risen by between 1.3 and 1.9 degrees since record keeping began in 1895, it's in the big, wild weather where the average person feels climate change the most, said co-author Katharine Hayhoe, a Texas Tech University climate scientist. Extreme weather hits us in the pocketbooks and can be seen with our own eyes, she said.

The report says the intensity, frequency and duration of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes have increased since the early 1980s, but it is still uncertain how much of that is from man-made warming. Winter storms have increased in frequency and intensity and have shifted northward since the 1950s, it says. Also, heavy downpours are increasing—by 71 percent in the Northeast. Heat waves, such as those in Texas in 2011 and the Midwest in 2012, are projected to intensify nationwide. Droughts in the Southwest are expected to get stronger. Sea level has risen 8 inches since 1880 and is projected to rise between 1 foot and 4 feet by 2100.

Climate data center chief Karl highlighted the increase in downpours. He said last week's drenching, when Pensacola, Florida, got up to two feet of rain in one storm and parts of the East had three inches in one day, is what he's talking about.



In this June 27, 2011 file photo, floodwaters from the Souris River surround homes near Minot State University in Minot, N.D. Global warming is rapidly turning America the beautiful into America the stormy, sneezy and dangerous, according to the National Climate Assessment report released Tuesday, May 6, 2014. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

The report says "climate change threatens human health and well-being in many ways." Those include smoke-filled air from wildfires, smoggy air from pollution, and more diseases from tainted food, water, mosquitoes and ticks. And ragweed pollen season has lengthened.

Flooding alone may cost \$325 billion by the year 2100 in one of the worst-case scenarios, with \$130 billion of that in Florida, the report says. Already the droughts and heat waves of 2011 and 2012 have added about \$10 billion to farm costs, the report says.

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