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Scientists look at how global warming would change your life

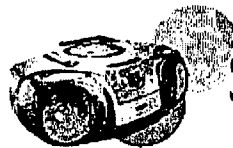
By Alan Boyle
MSNBC

WASHINGTON, Feb. 20 — How will changes in climate change your life? That depends on where you live, experts said Sunday. In the United States, Westerners might have to cope with more frequent floods and droughts, people in the Midwest and Northeast may have to suffer through more killer heat waves, and Southerners could see a decline in trees and birds. Those are just some of the predictions in a national assessment due for release this spring.

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'You can't stop
climate change.'

— **MICHAEL**

MACCRACKEN

U.S. Global Change Research
Program

THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT is part of a process set up by Congress to figure out what might happen if the global warming trend of the 20th century continues through the 21st century. During the past 100 years, average temperatures have risen by about 1 degree Fahrenheit (0.5 degrees C), and computer models predict that the temperature rise could be four times that amount over the next 100 years.

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National Assessment of Climate Change

Most scientists say there is mounting evidence that human factors such as greenhouse-gas emissions are accelerating climate change, while some skeptics maintain that the warming trend simply reflects natural variations in weather. In either case, a continuation of the trend could mean big lifestyle changes, experts say. The national assessment focuses on how Americans may have to adjust to shifts in climate, as well as ways to hold back the greenhouse effect.



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“We really have to think about both sides of that coin,” Michael MacCracken, director of the National Assessment Coordination Office of the U.S. Global Change Research Program, told

MSNBC. “You can’t stop climate change.”

WHAT’S IN STORE

MacCracken said a draft report due for release on the Internet in April would provide a “snapshot” of the latest scientific thinking on climate change’s effects in the United States. During this week’s annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, several researchers shared their panels’ preliminary conclusions about how specific sectors could be affected:

■ **Human health:** “Where you have problems today, there’s reason to expect you would have problems in the future,” said Dr. Jonathan Patz of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Public Health. That points to a potential increase in heat-related deaths, he said. One study indicated that a 1995 Chicago heat wave resulted in 700 excess deaths, and Patz said heat waves could become twice as common in Midwest and Northeast cities.

On other fronts, warmer, wetter weather might make it easier for water-borne diseases to spread, and there may be an upturn in shellfish poisoning, Patz said.

There is a flip side to higher average temperatures, Patz said: Milder winters would probably mean fewer deaths during that season of the year.

Underlying all of Patz’s projections is the importance of an advanced health-care system, capable of coping with weather emergencies: “Health infrastructure really is important, and it’s taken for

‘Where you have problems today, there’s reason to expect you would have problems in the future.’

— **DR. JONATHAN PATZ**
 Johns Hopkins University’s
 School of Public Health

granted.”

■ **Water resources:** “In the western United States, we’re likely to get the worst of all possible worlds” if the warming trend continues, said Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security, based in Oakland, Calif.

Warmer winters would likely mean more rainfall and less snowfall, as well as earlier snowmelt and runoff in the spring. That would increase the risk of springtime flooding. Moreover, areas that depend on mountain reservoirs of snow for their water supply might have less to fall back on — increasing the risk of summertime droughts.

The implications could be particularly serious for the West’s irrigation farmers, Gleick said.

“There are some basins in the United States where we’re already seeing this kind of change,” in the Sierra Nevadas and the Rockies, he said.

Rather than build new reservoir systems, “we have to rethink the way we operate (existing) systems,” Gleick said. Water system managers are used to coping with ebbs and flows in supply, but in the future they may have to deal with patterns that are “outside the realm of their existence,” he said. Consumers may feel the change, too, in water prices as well as land-use policies for flood plains.

■ **Forests:** America’s forests are likely to be more productive in the coming decades, said Steven McNulty of the U.S. Forest Service’s Southern Research Station in Asheville, N.C. But the increase would be felt primarily in the North, while Southern forests would experience “little increase, and possibly decreased forest growth,” he said.

The same situation would apply to plant and animal species: The West would see an increase in tree species and the South would suffer a decrease, and in the northern United States, species such as aspen, sugar maple, cedar, birch and fir could almost completely give way to Southern-style mixed hardwoods and pine.

“Bird species could decrease by 25 percent in the South ... while increasing in the North,” McNulty said. Some models suggest that forest fires could increase by 25 to 50 percent in the South, he said.

Climate change might also affect how you spend your leisure time: “Negative impacts on cool-climate recreational activities, such as the ski industry and trout fishing, could be expected,” McNulty said.

■ **Coastal areas:** Sea levels have risen about 7 inches

‘We have to rethink the way we operate (existing) systems.’

— **PETER GLEICK**
Pacific Institute for Studies in
Development, Environment
and Security

over the past century, and the climate changes projected for the next century would “add another foot to the 7 inches we’ve seen,” for a total rise of 18 to 20 inches, said Donald Boesch, president of the University of Maryland’s Center for Environmental Science.

The sea level rise is only one part of the equation, he pointed out. At the same time, some coastal areas — such as the Chesapeake Bay region, the Mississippi Delta and North Carolina — are subsiding, while other areas, such as the Alaskan coast, are actually rising from the sea.

“By 2030, we’ll have about an 8-inch relative sea level rise” in the Chesapeake Bay, he said, “and nearly 3 feet by the end of the century.”

Such a development would have “substantial consequences where there are low-lying lands and habitats,” he said.

There’s been no clear evidence that long-term climate change has affected the frequency or intensity of tropical storms, Boesch said. Shorter-term oceanic phenomena such as El Nino and the North Atlantic Oscillation appear to play more of a role on that front. But rising sea levels could mean storm surges would be ore damaging, he said.

Warmer sea water also could make coastal habitats more susceptible to invasion by non-native species, and there is already evidence that higher sea surface temperatures put more stress on coastal corals.

■ **Agriculture:** Farmers may have to change their routine if average temperatures rise — for example, by adjusting planting and harvest times, MacCracken said. If the warming trend continues, some may have to switch to more heat-tolerant strains of a particular crop or switch to new crops altogether.

During an earlier presentation not related to the national assessment, Cornell University ecologist David Pimentel argued that climate change could result in a net loss of available food.

“Although there may be some benefits in crop production from warmer climates, these beneficial effects will be more than offset by the projected decline in rainfall in critical crop-growing regions like the U.S. Corn Belt,” he said. Pimentel also suggested that crop losses from pest insects, plant pathogens and weeds would increase.



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