

The National Climate Assessment Turns Up the Heat on Governments to Prepare and Adapt

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“Climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present.” With this statement, the Third National Climate Assessment: *Climate Change Impacts in the United States (Climate Assessment)* signals a sea change in the way governments must think about climate change. Climate change is no longer a future phenomenon that governments may consider addressing; it is now an ongoing event, creating impacts that threaten the safety and well-being of communities and compelling a governmental response.

The *Climate Assessment* is an extensive collection of documents, produced by a team of 300 experts, guided by a 60-member advisory committee, as authorized by the Global Change Research Act of 1990. All of the documents – 30 chapters, 6 appendices, a 100-page “Highlights” book, and an “Overview” booklet – are available at nca2014.globalchange.gov. Thirteen of the chapters in the *Climate Assessment* focus on sectors of the national economy, ten chapters focus on regions of the country, and five chapters focus on responses. The *Climate Assessment* is a valuable resource which concerned people will want to explore for themselves. This article is but an introduction.

The *Climate Assessment* presents twelve major findings, each of which is supported by a substantial amount of evidence. One of the major findings is: “Climate change poses particular threats to Indigenous Peoples’ health, well-being, and ways of life.” The evidence supporting this finding is presented in Chapter 12 of the *Climate Assessment*, which is captioned “Indigenous Peoples, Lands, and Resources.” This chapter states that climate change impacts on many tribes “are projected to be especially severe,” and that “adaptive responses to multiple social and ecological challenges arising from climate impacts on indigenous communities will occur against a complex backdrop of centuries-old cultures already stressed by historical events and contemporary conditions.” This chapter also observes that Native populations are vulnerable to climate change impacts “because their physical, mental, intellectual, social, and cultural well-being is traditionally tied to a close relationship with the natural world, and because of their dependence on the land and resources for basic needs such as medicine, shelter, and food.”

Chapter 12 highlights a range of climate change impacts with particularly severe effects on tribal communities. These impacts are presented as five “key messages” about the ways that climate change is causing: (1) reduced access to traditional foods, due to factors such as warmer temperatures, more frequent droughts, and longer fire seasons; (2) decreasing water quality and quantity, and less predictability as to availability, due to factors such as reduced rainfall and snowfall, melting glaciers, and shifts in ocean currents; (3) declining sea ice, which is causing a variety of impacts in Alaska; (4) thawing permafrost, which is damaging infrastructure and stressing cultural traditions in Alaska; and (5) relocation, in Alaska and among other coastal tribal communities.

The *Climate Assessment* is one part of what could become a comprehensive program to deal with climate change. Other steps toward the development of such a program include President Obama's *Climate Action Plan*, issued in June 2013, and Executive Order 13653 on Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change, issued on November 1, 2013. The Executive Order recognizes that "[t]he impacts of climate change – including an increase in prolonged periods of excessively high temperatures, more heavy downpours, an increase in wildfires, more severe droughts, permafrost thawing, ocean acidification, and sea-level rise – are already affecting communities, natural resources, ecosystems, economics, and public health across the Nation."

The White House has set a mission for the federal government to pursue new strategies to improve the Nation's preparedness and resilience, in part through modernizing federal programs to support the efforts of states, regions, local communities and tribes to support climate resilient investment; managing lands and waters for climate preparedness and resilience; and providing related information, data, and tools. When the President issued Executive Order 13653, he also created the State, Local, and the Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience, and he directed it to provide recommendations to the President and a Council of federal agencies on how the federal government can (i) remove barriers, create incentives, and modernize federal programs to facilitate increased resilience to climate impacts, including those associated with extreme weather; (ii) provide useful climate preparedness tools and actionable information for state, local communities, and tribes; and (iii) support state, local, and tribal preparedness for and resilience to climate change.

That Task Force is due to report to the President by November 1, 2014. The two Tribal leaders on the Task Force recently conducted a "Survey for Recommendations," with a deadline of May 2 for filing comments. Although that deadline has passed, the Tribal leaders on the Task Force might still be interested in receiving suggestions that draw on the recently published *Climate Assessment*. The Task Force will surely draw on the *Climate Assessment* in preparing their report to the President, and we assume that they would appreciate receiving comments that apply local and traditional tribal knowledge and experience to the information presented in the *Climate Assessment*.

As an example of the kinds of recommendations tribes might make, consider the presentation in the *Climate Assessment* on the impacts to forest health and biodiversity. The *Climate Assessment* found that these impacts affect the distribution and abundance of important food sources and increase the frequency and intensity of large wildfires, which threaten tribal homes, safety, economies, culturally important species, medicinal plants, and cultural sites. Some possibilities of the actions that tribe might recommend the federal government take to support tribal efforts to address such impacts include: (i) ensuring that federal forest health programs extend to tribal lands and looking to tribes, and Indian or Native-owned companies, to implement forest health activities on federally managed lands; (ii) supporting efforts of tribal housing authorities to implement enhanced building standards to resist wildfire and increase energy efficiency; (iii) supporting infrastructure improvements, such as transportation facilities, to safely evacuate and protect residents (iv) directing emergency response and preparedness funding from the Department of Homeland Security to tribal governments facing climate impacts; and (v) supporting research and programs to respond to health conditions related to altered diets, hotter summers, and impaired water quality.

With respect to water quality and quantity, the *Climate Assessment* underscores the need for quantification of tribal water rights (especially groundwater), new datasets to quantify and evaluate current conditions and emerging trends, and improvements to tribal water infrastructure. Tribes may consider making recommendations for policies and programs within several agencies, including the Department of the Interior, Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Justice, to ensure that they support tribes in these areas.

Although the time for engaging the President's Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience is limited, the release of the *Climate Assessment* provides tribes with an excellent resource to use in developing and advocating for recommendations to modernize federal policies and programs to support the efforts of tribal governments to protect their communities and their citizens from the impacts of climate change. Moreover, the *Climate Assessment* is a resource that we will be drawing on for years to come, long after the Task Force has given its report to the President. In this article, we have focused on the chapter that specifically addressed impacts on indigenous peoples, but tribal people who want to deal with climate change should not restrict themselves to that chapter. Most of the other chapters address issues that are of concern for tribal communities, whether or not tribal issues are explicitly included. For example, those who are interested in governmental actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions should investigate chapter 27 on "Mitigation." Climate change is real and it's happening now. The *Climate Assessment* is a valuable resource.

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