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Environmental group's report warns state of ocean changes

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Surrounded on three sides by water, Florida could face wide-ranging impacts from global warming and sea level rise.

A statewide coalition of eight environmental groups released a report Wednesday urging officials to start getting ready now for what may come.

The report, "Preparing for a Sea Change in Florida," is one of several climate change-related events planned in the coming months, including Gov. Charlie Crist's summit in Miami in June. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission plans a summit later this summer on possible effects of global warming on the state's wildlife.

The environmentalists' report calls on state, federal and local officials to take immediate action to protect habitat, direct development away from the shoreline and reconsider insurance subsidies that promote continued rebuilding in hazardous areas. It lists dozens of recommendations on how that could be done.

It's a "a road map to help Florida protect its coastal and marine resources, no matter what comes," said Patti Glick, one of the lead authors of the report.

"Any of these ideas would be a good idea for Florida," said Joe Murphy with the Gulf Restoration Network. "But given the potential for climate change, they are things we must do."

Not all scientists agree the ocean and Earth will continue to warm at the same rate it has in recent decades. But even with modest projections of a 7- to 15-inch rise in sea level by 2100, most experts say many coastal areas would be affected and possibly some inland areas, for example low-lying areas near the St. Johns River. Members of the group said such an increase would add to the potential devastation from hurricane-related storm surges and heavy surf.

Government agencies should work together to come up with strategies to reduce development pressure on frontal dunes, said David Godfrey, executive director of the Caribbean Conservation Corp.

"Current policies, along with a number of public subsidies, still encourage beachfront development," Godfrey said. And, "much of Florida's coastline already is critically eroding."

Other issues that concern the group include the effects of a 2 to 5 degree rise in ocean temperature and possible changes in acidity on the state's coral reefs. Not only do the reefs draw millions of tourists each year, they're critical spawning and feeding grounds for many fish species, said Paul Johnson of Reef Relief.

The report will be given to the governor's climate energy action team today, said Jerry Karnas, a member of the team and the Florida climate project director for the Environmental Defense. The action team is trying to provide strategies to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, which are thought by many scientists to be one of the primary causes of global warming. Karnas said the team also has a group working on strategies for adapting to climate change.

The governor's climate summit is scheduled to take place June 25 and 26.

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