

Environmental groups warn of global warming's effects on Florida

By ERIC STAATS

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Florida should act now to avoid being a big loser as the earth's climate changes, a coalition of environmental groups urged Wednesday.

The Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition released a report recommending a series of steps to combat the effects of rising sea levels, extreme weather and declining ocean health.

"We need more than just planning, we need action today," said National Wildlife Federation senior global warming specialist Patty Glick, the report's primary author.

Among the report's recommendations:

- Require coastal counties to consider sea-level rise when amending growth plans.
- Review the effectiveness of the state's coastal construction setback line program, discourage coastal development and use tax incentives or public acquisition to encourage existing coastal development to relocate further inland.
- Upgrade drainage systems, protect wetlands and increase water quality standards to guard against heavier and more frequent rainfall washing pollution into rivers and bays.
- Rebuild depleted stocks of ocean fish and establish marine reserves to promote biodiversity in the face of warmer ocean temperatures that can harm coral, exacerbate marine diseases and change where fish are found.
- Monitor coral and oyster reefs and scallop beds for effects of more acidic oceans as they absorb more carbon dioxide.

The report, "Preparing for a Sea Change in Florida," is the "beginning of a long dialogue" in Florida about how to deal with global warming, said Gerald Karnas, Florida climate project director for the Environmental Defense Fund.

"It's a broad commitment from leadership that we're looking for first," he said.

Other members of the coalition are the Caribbean Conservation Corp., Environmental Defense Fund, the Gulf Restoration Network, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Ocean Conservancy, Reef Relief and the Surfrider Foundation.

Karnas is an appointee to Gov. Charlie Crist's energy and climate change task force, which is preparing its own recommendations due by Oct. 1.

In 2007, Crist set a target for Florida to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent of 1990 levels by 2050.

That's only part of the solution, the coalition reported Wednesday.

The environmental and economic consequences are coming, according to the report, even with reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that many scientists blame for global warming.

"There's still a lot of work to do," David Godfrey, executive director of the Caribbean Conservation Corp.

For example, the state Department of Environmental Protection's strategic beach management plan for 2007 made

no mention of sea-level rise or climate change, he said.

A United Nations panel of scientists has estimated up to a 2-foot rise in global average sea levels by the end of the century, but some scientists warn that the rise could be quicker.

The state's leading home builder group disagrees that development along the beaches should be reconsidered.

Noting that 80 percent of the state's population lives within 20 miles of the coast — and wants to live close to the beach — Florida Home Builders Association spokeswoman Edie Ousley said the group wouldn't support a wholesale shift of development away from the oceans.

That would only create sprawl, she said.

Lost tourism revenue, hurricane damages and at-risk real estate from global warming could add up to \$327 billion by 2100, researchers from Tufts University predicted in 2007.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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