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Activists target coastal growth

TALLAHASSEE

While Florida should do its best to avoid global warming, it should also prepare for it by discouraging new building along coasts that could be under water one day, a coalition of environmental groups said Wednesday.

"We need to be particularly thoughtful about determining where we're going to build our homes and businesses, and what actions we're going to take when these structures are threatened by rising seas," said David Godfrey, executive director of the Caribbean Conservation Corp., one of the members of the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition.

The group is calling on state and local government to minimize beachfront development in light of the possibility that today's beaches could be in tomorrow's ocean.

The state could target its program for buying environmentally sensitive property toward buying more beachfront land, Godfrey said. It could also offer tax incentives for developers to shun beaches for more inland areas.

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 would not support a wholesale shift of development away from the oceans. That would only create sprawl, she said.

Ultimately, the environmental group said, reductions must be made in production of the greenhouse gases that many scientists blame for increasing global temperatures.

It is not just Florida coastal communities that are likely to be affected, but also the nearshore oceans. Those habitats are not only important to the ocean food chain, but also critically important to Florida's economy, because of commercial and recreational fishing and diving.

Global warming is harming coral reefs, which are unique to Florida in the continental United States, the researchers reported. Warmer ocean temperatures have long been known to cause damaging coral bleaching, but newer research also shows increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is likely dissolving in sea water to form carbonic acid. That makes the ocean water more acidic, damaging the coral. Acidic water can also damage clams and other shellfish critical to the ocean's food chain.

Damaged coral means less dive tourism to Florida waters, and a damaged habitat for important fisheries.

"The ocean is on a life-support system, and it's time we strengthen and sustain that which sustains us," said David White, regional director of the Ocean Conservancy, another study participant.

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