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Feb, 11, 2009

Study: Climate change to have many impacts on Wash

By DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP / Associated Press Writer

SEATTLE -- During the next 50 years, climate change will have a dramatic impact on Washington state - snowpack is expected to decrease, water shortages are coming, wildfires could double in size, and more people may die - according to a new report from scientists across the region.

The report from the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington paints a bleak picture of the impact of climate change on human health, agriculture, energy supply and demand, streamflow and water storage.

The 2007 Legislature paid for the report being released Wednesday to help policymakers plan for the future. It was inspired by a similar study in California, said Philip Mote, Washington state's climatologist and a researcher at the Climate Impacts Group.

"We have a greater ability to describe and foresee the changes in climate and what they'll mean for the region than ever before," said Mote, who was one of more than 60 scientists - from government agencies, UW, Washington State University, the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory and the University of Idaho - who did the research for this report.

Mote said it was the first time scientists took a closer look at the impact of climate change on Washington agriculture, health, energy and infrastructure. Much of the research is brand new, from work done over the past year and a half, he said.

"It's not all bad and not all immediate," Mote said of the findings. For example, potatoes grow better with higher levels of carbon dioxide and some kinds of winter wheat are expected to have higher yields when temperatures are warmer earlier.

Much of the report does offer a grim picture of the future:

- An increase in annual temperatures of 3.5 degrees Fahrenheit by the 2040s, and 5.9 degrees by the 2080s.
- April 1 snowpack decreased by nearly 30 percent across the state by the 2020s, 40 percent by the 2040s and 65 percent by the 2080s.
- The Yakima Basin reservoir system less likely to supply water to all its users, especially those with junior water rights.
- Rising stream temperatures, which will hurt salmon.
- Forest fires burning double the area by the 2040s and triple by the 2080s.
- Increases in incidents of extreme high precipitation over the next half-century.
- Energy demand for cooling is expected to increase 400 percent by 2040.
- More heat- and air pollution-related deaths throughout the century. Researchers project that by 2025 there could be 101 more deaths among people 45 and older because of heat waves.

Because the UW Climate Impacts Group focuses on adaptation to climate change, not prevention or reversal, the findings of the study won't necessarily lead to expensive new programs, Mote explained.

"In a lot of cases, it doesn't take that much money to incorporate awareness of climate change," he said, offering as an example government agencies planning for sea level rise when they plan projects along Puget Sound.

"Over time, some of this will cost money, but having an awareness of how climate will affect decisions that have a long lifetime is a good starting point," he added.

The public is invited to learn more about the report and talk to scientists involved in the research at an all-day forum Thursday at the Washington State Convention Center.