

Conference eyes climate change

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By Sarah Cooper - Staff Writer (scooper@theintermountain.com) , Inter-Mountain

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DAVIS - An array of scientists, college professors, lawyers, and concerned citizens from many areas across the nation gathered last weekend in Blackwater Falls State Park at the "West Virginia Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Initiative" to discuss the reality of climate change and how it could begin rapidly impacting the Allegheny Highlands more and more in years to come.

165 people were present, including 19 presenters who shared their research into climate change throughout the Allegheny region and the results of the climatic trends in West Virginia surprised many.

"Climate change is new. This is important for us as we consider the ways we can conserve the wonderful species of our state," said Elizabeth Byers M.S.

Article Photos



The Inter-Mountain photo by Sarah Cooper

Researchers, such as Elizabeth Byers M.S., have found that while many species are vulnerable to climate change, others are more adaptable.

As the Earth warms, species secure in the mountains, such as the Native Brook Trout population, will no longer be considered secure and will decrease because they will not have the cooler mountain river water that they need to survive.

Other species such as the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel and the Cheat Mountain Salamander are also expected to decrease or become extinct as they are highly dependent on colder niches and altitudes.

According to many at the conference, most of the original habitats in West Virginia could become more or less extinct.

Concerning the topic of plant species, a growth in White Oak trees is predicted while a decrease in suitable habitats for Sugar Maples are being examined. This means that Oak and Hickory trees will be more suitable for West Virginia's climate while Sugar Maple trees will find more suitable habitats further north.

Climatic affects have already been seen within the tree species of West Virginia as the once plentiful amount of Chestnut trees is virtually gone.

With this taken into account, maple syrup will no longer be readily made in West Virginia and will be manufactured more exclusively in northern countries or states. Apple orchards will also no longer be capable or find it much more difficult to survive in specific areas such as the bordering state of Pennsylvania.

Furthermore, through the studies of climatologists and biologists, it was concluded that farmers forty years from now will see a change in crop growth. Crops that were once grown in certain areas must be moved to more northern areas. Farmers are also expected to see drier, longer growing seasons with heavier periods of yearly rainfall.

According to presentations by climatologist, Dr. Kevin Law and geographer, Dr. Alton Byers, the national climate assessment among other sources of research predict that by the year 2055 the Allegheny region will have more days where precipitation exceeds the limit of one inch, will experience a drier season with anywhere from five to thirty days of temperatures above 95 degrees in a consecutive string of three to nine days at one time.

While Dr. Kevin Law firmly believes that the string of weather extremes is a result of how the atmosphere is warming, he warned the audience that weather is unpredictable. Though he can scientifically predict what could potentially happen within the next century it is difficult to pinpoint or forecast future events.

"These are things we've never really had to deal with before," Byers said.

Byers works closely with high altitude studies and has spent time examining glacial areas and remnants.

Upon doing so, he has found that glacial areas are becoming vulnerable and because of their melting they have the potential to cause mass flooding and glaciers can detach, setting forth a series of events that have the power to kill thousands.

The melting of glaciers also creates bedrock exposure that leads to mineral contamination in water and an overall decrease in water quality.

"The frequency will not continue to increase as we transition into a warmer world," said Ohio State University professor and climatologist, Dr. Lonnie Thompson who was unable to attend but extended his lecture through fellow colleagues.

Many discussed organizing protests, taking political action, raising specific taxes, continuing with regulations, creating organizations throughout the state, partnering states, and West Virginia University in order to continue gaging the extent of the climate change and prepare for the future or reverse highly detrimental effects to the environment so that they may be prevented or less severe for future generations.

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