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Climate change has arrived

HeraldEd@MiamiHerald.com



NASA

Climate change in the Arapaho glacial melt in Colorado.

In case there was still any doubt, and there shouldn't be at this point, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations group of scientists, has made it official: Climate change is not coming, it's already here. And it's going to get worse unless the whole world — especially the industrial world — greatly reduces greenhouse emissions causing global warming.

The U.N. panel periodically weighs in on the state of the Earth's climate. Its latest report cites melting ice caps, collapsing sea ice in the Arctic, heat waves and heavy deluges that are increasing in intensity and threatening crops, bringing on concerns

about sustainable food supplies. Coral reefs are dying. Oceans are rising, while the oceans' waters are becoming more acidic as they absorb carbon dioxide emitted by vehicles and power plants.

"Climate change impacts are projected to slow down economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, further erode food security, and prolong existing and new poverty traps" in urban areas and emerging "hot spots" of hunger, the report says. Some of the people most at risk have little to do with causing global warming. Low-lying countries like Bangladesh and island nations in the Pacific Ocean could be the worst hit over the next few decades.

But equally at risk are people who live in luxurious condos and play at resorts along Florida's coasts.

Attention, people up North: If you are hoping to retire to enjoy Florida's coastal lifestyle in the future, plan to spend plenty of money on flood and windstorm insurance.

Florida's native seafood is going to cost more, too, as coral reefs that nurture fish dwindle and acidic ocean water becomes inhospitable for snapper and grouper.

Wherever you live, expect to pay more for food in general.

The long drought in the Western United States is forcing ranchers to reduce their livestock inventory as grazing land dries up.

Parched prairie farms need more water to irrigate their crops even as underground aquifers fed by less rain and melting snow begin to shrink.

Fewer food animals and lower crop yield are consequences of a warming climate the world over. The U.N. panel's latest report card dwells more on threats to the world's food supply than any others it has issued. Scarce food supplies can cause conflicts between sides warring over arable land, for instance.

All dire stuff. But there are a few bright spots. The report noted that more governments and businesses worldwide are acknowledging climate change, the first step to doing something about it.

The Obama administration has taken some steps to curb auto and power-plant emissions and plans more. Advocates of curbing greenhouse emissions, still pretty much a tepid battle overall, have a new partner — those trying to adapt to warming's impacts.

Both tactics are alive in South Florida. Communities have formed alliances to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions even as they seek ways to mitigate rising sea levels to protect water supplies and sewage systems, for instance. Small steps, but we have to start somewhere. If only the rest of Florida would wake up.

The U.N. climate report is sobering for what it signifies for our children and their children. We can't keep practicing magical thinking and believe the problem will go away in time to allow future generations to have a better quality of life on an increasingly inhospitable Earth.

We must act now, as individuals, as a state, as a nation of the world.

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