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Great Lakes may see extreme weather

Report projects drop in water levels, fewer trees by end of century

By John Flesher
Associated Press

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. -- Shallow water levels and disappearing pine trees are among possible results of climate change in the Great Lakes region by the end of the century, scientists say.

Lake-effect snowfall may decline, while blizzards, tornadoes and other extreme weather could increase. Northern areas may enjoy a longer growing season, but crop yields across the region could vary widely.

The projections are contained in a report issued Monday for the U.S. Global Change Research Program, a federal project begun in the late 1980s to determine what global warming could mean for the environment and the economy.

Nearly three dozen scientists contributed to the Great Lakes report, one of a number of regional assessments being conducted as part of the national study.

By the end of the 21st century, average temperatures will be 3.6 to 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit higher than now and precipitation will have jumped 25 percent, the report says.

It shows that ``global climate change will have dramatic effects on the environment right in our back yard," said Patty Glick, climate change coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation.

It could be the fatal blow for a number of the region's endangered and threatened species by depriving them of habitat and food, Glick said in a telephone news conference.

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Various sectors of the economy also could be hit hard, she said. Low water levels would spell trouble for the shipping industry, as has happened over the past couple of years. Winter tourism could suffer if snowfall declines.

``I don't think by any stretch of the imagination we should throw up our hands and say it's too late," Glick said.

The full report is posted at glra.engin.umich.edu or one thing, his team of scientists conducted a workshop in 1998 to seek input from industry, academics, government officials and other ``stakeholders." From their suggestions, the scientists decided to examine what practical implications climate change might have for everyday life.

``Our assessment involved a true integrated team effort and significant collaboration, using the best science available," Sousounis said.

Among the report's findings:

■ Lake-effect snow may decline, particularly around Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. That would produce a mixed economic bag, requiring less snow removal and causing fewer traffic disruptions but hampering winter recreation in the southern Great Lakes.

■ Computer models differ on the extent to which lake levels will be affected. But one scenario envisions a drop of 1.5 to 3 feet within three decades on some of the lakes. Ice cover will decrease, promoting evaporation. Lower levels could prompt more dredging, which could increase pollution by stirring contaminated sediment.

■ Tree species such as the quaking aspen, yellow birch and various pines may no longer be able to grow in the region. Red, white and jack pines are particularly temperature-sensitive, needing winters to be cold enough to reach a dormant stage crucial to their long-term survival, Sousounis said.

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