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South Bend Tribune

November 20, 2001

Forecast: Mild winters, lower lake levels

Tribune Staff and Wire Reports

Climate experts at the University of Michigan's biological station in Pellston say rising global temperatures could result in mild winters with little snow over the next 50 years.

Climate change is a result of rising carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. One of the so-called greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide is released when fuels such as gasoline are burned.

In Michigan, scientists predict that over the next few decades summers will become longer and hotter. And winters will become shorter and warmer with less snow. The levels of the Great Lakes will be lower, while intense storms likely are to be more frequent.

Those predictions are from the century-old university laboratory located a few miles south of the Mackinac Bridge.

"It's very important to have many of these measurement capabilities in one location so you can look at their interactions," said the station's director, Jim Teeri.

Lelani Arris, senior editor of Global Change, a quarterly publication based in Oakland, Calif., agrees with the assessments of Michigan's forecast. Global Change is a publication of the Pacific Institute, an independent, nonprofit center created in 1987 to do research and policy analysis in the areas of environment and sustainable development.

"I would suspect that that's likely," Arris said. "Nobody knows for sure what will happen, but in general those sorts of changes are what we are expecting for a good portion of North America.

"More and more scientists are coming on board and agreeing that we are in for some serious changes. I have not seen anything in the peer review literature that would contradict that."

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Peer reviewed literature is reviewed by scientists in the field, Arris said.

The prediction regarding more intense storms could well be correct, too, she said.

"It has to do generally with hydrological cycle," she said. "That's one all scientists view with a little more caution. The probability of intense storms is a little more problematic. More frequent extremes, we are already seeing that."

Scientists and environmental activists say increasing temperatures could have a big impact on the state's timber, farming, fishing, shipping, tourism and automotive industries.

"Michigan is incredibly out of touch with what is happening," said Lana Pollack, executive director of the Michigan Environmental Council. She said that many other state governments are trying to plan for a warmer future.

At Michigan State University's tourism resource center, director Don Holecek said climate change isn't a pressing issue for Michigan businesses.

Some experiments at the university's biological station explore the impact rising temperatures have on plant life.

Plants will grow more quickly and many will be less nutritious, per pound, than plants exposed to less carbon dioxide, according to David Karowe, a biologist at Western Michigan University who spends summers teaching and conducting research at the university station.

But it all hinges on long-range weather trends. The National Weather Service does not concern itself with predicting those.

It does, however, give long-range forecasts for three months.

Mike Sabones, meteorologist at the North Webster, Ind., office, said the latest outlook for December, January and February for this region actually calls for cooler than normal temperatures on the northern fringe states during those months.

"The outlook for December is fairly near normal temps and precipitation," he said. "But it does look like it might be a little cooler than normal in January and February. Precipitation outlooks are near normal."

Tribune staff writer Jim Meenan contributed to this report.

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