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Warmer weather in store for state

Michigan to feel change in climate, experts say

November 19, 2001

BY EMILIA ASKARI

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Mild winters with little snow in the Lower Peninsula and the growth of less-nutritious plants are ways in which world climate change could affect Michigan over the next 50 years.

That's what research at the University of Michigan's biological station in Pellston has discovered. Scientists say rising global temperatures are likely to touch every living thing in the state.

Higher average temperatures also have potential implications for Michigan businesses -- including the tourism and logging industries -- though few may consider that now.

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.

Much research worldwide aims to predict how higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could affect the weather.

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

Those predictions are from the century-old U-M laboratory located on an ecosystem dividing line a few miles south of the Mackinac Bridge.

For several years, 90 percent of the grant applications by scientists associated with the biological station have been approved, according to the station's director, Jim Teeri, who advises congressional aides and business leaders about climate change.

The forests of the biological station now hum with equipment that measures climatic changes and their impacts.

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

Although some Michigan scientists participate in international discussions on climate change, few government and business leaders in the state have addressed the topic. Scientists and environmental activists, however, 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," says Lana Pollack, executive director of the Michigan Environmental Council. She says many other state governments are trying to plan for a warmer future, but not Michigan's.

No one at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation is thinking about climate change, according to a spokesman.

At Michigan State University's tourism resource center, director Don Holecek says climate change is rarely mentioned in industry discussions. If it were, Holecek says, he would advise Michiganders in the travel business not to fret.

"Maybe we could get Lake Superior warm enough to swim in," he says.

For tourism, winter would be the season most adversely affected, Holecek says. Those who enjoy snow-based sports might be disappointed. But, he adds, "we might be able to get a lot of

people who cocoon in the winter now out and on the road."

Some in the auto industry have begun to discuss business opportunities arising from climate change. Worldwide, about one-third of the carbon-dioxide emissions come from vehicles. If public concern about emissions grows, some auto companies want to be ready with fuel-efficient vehicles that emit less carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

Ford Motor Co. has given the biological station about \$250,000 for research over the past three years.

"We don't expect to get anything commercial out of it, but, on the other hand, we want to have a heads-up about what's important," says Jim Anderson, manager of external technology for Ford Research. "We're certainly up to our necks in questions of carbon dioxide from cars."

Some of the most interesting experiments at U-M's biological station explore another, potentially more disruptive consequence of higher carbon dioxide levels:

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 U-M station.

Insects that feed on the less-nutritious plants are smaller, less fecund and sometimes less resistant to parasites than insects that eat plants exposed to current carbon dioxide levels, Karowe's data shows.

Does that mean people may be smaller, more sickly and less resistant to disease in 50 years? Karowe isn't willing to go that far.

But Karowe wants to know how animal species -- including people -- react to eating less nutritious plants. "It's not clear how strongly humans will be impacted," Karowe says.

Visit the biological station's Web site at www.umich.edu/~umbs/

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