

California must adapt to climate change, state officials tell Senate panel

Timm Herdt, Ventura County Star, 2-26-15

SACRAMENTO — As recently as two years ago, January was pretty much the off season for the first responders at CalFire, the agency that fights wildfires across the state.

In January 2013, there were zero wildfires in California.

In January 2014, there were 473.

“The fire season has roughly expanded by 60 days,” said Natural Resources Agency Secretary John Laird. “Yes, there is some pattern emerging.”

Longer fire seasons, more intense fires, crippling droughts, hotter temperatures, extreme heat events, rising sea levels — all are effects of climate change to which California must adapt, experts told a Senate committee on Wednesday.

“We need to understand that in spite of our best efforts we need to prepare for things like sea-level rise and reduced precipitation,” state Environmental Protection Agency Secretary Matt Rodriguez told the panel.

Rodriguez said an interagency task force called the Climate Action Team, created by executive order under former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and retained by Gov. Jerry Brown, has broadened its focus in recent years to deal with adaptation strategies as well as efforts to mitigate global warming by reducing carbon emissions in California.

Sen. Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont, chairman of the Environmental Quality Committee, said after the hearing that the testimony demonstrated the need for legislation he has introduced to give permanent status to the Climate Action Team.

“The only statewide planning direction is contained in two executive orders,” he said. “And as we all know, governors and administrations change, and priorities can change just as quickly.”

Witnesses testified that the effects of climate change threaten not just the environment but also public health.

“Climate change is the greatest threat to public health in the 21st century,” said Dr. Linda Rudolph of the Oakland-based Public Health Institute.

She added that’s especially true with extreme heat, which can directly threaten the elderly and indirectly harm those with respiratory diseases by producing ground-level pollutants in the air.

Data from the California Climate Tracker show that 2014 was the hottest year on record in the state, topping the previous record set in 2010 by a full degree Fahrenheit and registering 3.3 degrees above the long-term historical baseline. Since 2000, statewide mean temperatures have been above the historical average in all but two years.

Rudolph said the challenge for policymakers is to create “climate-resilient communities” through such

tactics as promoting urban green spaces that can help cool cities and also help replenish groundwater supplies, which have become overtaxed as a result of reduced rainfall.

Laird said state and local planners have to prepare for extreme events as they design long-term capital improvements.

In Santa Cruz, he noted, the city's wastewater treatment facility, which relies on gravity to move water, was designed based on the existing sea level.

"If you do not factor in the effects of climate change, you're going to be making 50-year capital improvements without considering sea-level rise," he said.

Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross said the specialty crops industry created a consortium in 2011 to specifically consider steps to adapting to higher temperatures and reduced rainfall. The group has identified research needs such as development of more resilient plants and changes in farming practices.

"It's so easy to take for granted all that we have available in California," she said, referring to the variety of produce that can be purchased at supermarkets and farmers markets. "But they're very, very sensitive to temperature and drought."

Christina Curry, deputy director of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, said her agency has had no choice but to consider how to adapt for extreme events.

"We have embedded climate adaptation in what we do because there's such a clear nexus to everything except earthquakes," she said.

Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, who in 2006 co-authored the state's landmark law to roll back carbon emissions, urged state agencies to look for "double-win possibilities" that could both reduce carbon emissions and help adapt to climate-change challenges.

"In California, we have yet to have any debate over whether climate change exists," she said. "Unlike in the U.S. Senate, we can actually talk about it. It's very real for California."