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United States Environmental Protection Agency

August 2016

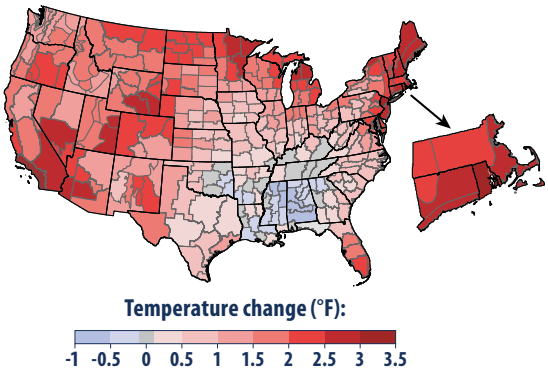
EPA 430-F-16-009

What Climate Change *Means for* Connecticut

Connecticut's climate is changing. The state has warmed two to three degrees (F) in the last century. Throughout the northeastern United States, spring is arriving earlier and bringing more precipitation, heavy rainstorms are more frequent, and summers are hotter and drier. Sea level is rising, and severe storms increasingly cause floods that damage property and infrastructure. In the coming decades, changing the climate is likely to increase flooding, harm ecosystems, disrupt farming, and increase some risks to human health.

Our climate is changing because the earth is warming. Since the late 1700s, people have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the air by 40 percent. Other heat-trapping greenhouse gases are also increasing. These gases have warmed the surface and lower atmosphere of our planet about one degree during the last 50 years. Evaporation increases as the atmosphere warms, which increases humidity, average rainfall, and the frequency of heavy rainstorms in many places—but contributes to drought in others.

Greenhouse gases are also changing the world's oceans and ice cover. Carbon dioxide reacts with water to form carbonic acid, so the oceans are becoming more acidic. The surface of the ocean has warmed about one degree during the last 80 years. Warming is causing snow to melt earlier in spring, and mountain glaciers are retreating. Even the great ice sheets on Greenland and Antarctica are shrinking. Thus the sea is rising at an increasing rate.



Rising temperatures in the last century. Connecticut has warmed twice as much as the rest of the contiguous 48 states. Source: EPA, Climate Change Indicators in the United States.

Increasing Temperature and Changing Precipitation Patterns

Rising temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns are likely to increase the intensity of both floods and droughts. Average annual precipitation in the Northeast increased 10 percent from 1895 to 2011, and precipitation from extremely heavy storms has increased 70 percent since 1958. During the next century, average annual precipitation and the frequency of heavy downpours are likely to keep rising. Average precipitation is likely to increase during winter and spring, but not change significantly during summer and fall. Rising temperatures will melt snow earlier in spring and increase evaporation, and thereby dry the soil during summer and fall. So flooding is likely to be worse during winter and spring, and droughts worse during summer and fall.

In 2011, Hurricane Irene filled the Connecticut River with muddy sediment as a result of erosion upstream. Heavy storms are becoming more common as a result of climate change. Credit: NASA.

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Sea Level Rise, Wetland Loss, and Coastal Flooding

Rising sea level erodes wetlands and beaches and increases damage from coastal storms. Tidal wetlands are inherently vulnerable because of their low elevations, and shoreline development prevents them from migrating inland onto higher ground. Human activities such as filling wetlands have destroyed about one third of New England's coastal wetlands since the early 1800s. Wetlands provide habitat for many bird species, such as osprey and heron, as well as several fish species. Losing coastal wetlands would harm coastal ecosystems and remove an important line of defense against coastal flooding.

Coastal cities and towns will become more vulnerable to storms in the coming century as sea level rises, shorelines erode, and storm surges become higher. Storms can destroy coastal homes, wash out highways and rail lines, and damage essential communication, energy, and wastewater management infrastructure.

Coastal marshes in Old Saybrook and nearby properties are at risk from sea level rise. © James G. Titus; used by permission.

Ecosystems and Agriculture

Changing the climate threatens ecosystems by disrupting relationships between species. Wildflowers and woody perennials are blooming—and migratory birds are arriving—sooner in spring. Not all species adjust in the same way, however, so the food that one species needs may no longer be available when that species arrives on its migration. Warmer temperatures allow deer populations to increase, leading to a loss of forest underbrush, which makes some animals more vulnerable to predators. Rising temperatures also enable invasive species to move into areas that were previously too cold.

Climate change may also pose challenges for agriculture: Warmer temperatures cause cows to eat less and produce less milk. That could reduce the output of Connecticut's $70-million dairy industry, which provides 13 percent of the state's farm revenue. Some farms may be harmed if more hot days and droughts reduce crop yields, or if more flooding and wetter springs delay their planting dates. Other farms may benefit from a longer growing season and the fertilizing effect of carbon dioxide.

Human Health

Changes in temperature and precipitation could increase the incidence of acute and chronic respiratory conditions such as asthma. Higher temperatures can increase the formation of ground-level ozone (smog), a pollutant that can contribute to respiratory problems. Rising temperatures may also increase the length and severity of the pollen season for plants such as ragweed—which has already been observed in other regions. Certain people are especially vulnerable, including children, the elderly, the sick, and the poor.

The risk of some diseases carried by insects may also increase. The ticks that transmit Lyme disease are active when temperatures are above 45°F, so warmer winters could lengthen the season during which ticks can become infected or people can be exposed to the ticks. Higher temperatures would also make more of New England warm enough for the Asian tiger mosquito, a common carrier of West Nile virus. The number of cases may or may not increase, depending on what people do to control insect populations and avoid insect bites.

The sources of information about climate and the impacts of climate change in this publication are: the national climate assessments by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, synthesis and assessment products by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, assessment reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and EPA's *Climate Change Indicators in the United States*. Mention of a particular season, location, species, or any other aspect of an impact does not imply anything about the likelihood or importance of aspects that are not mentioned. For more information about climate change science, impacts, responses, and what you can do, visit EPA's Climate Change website at www.epa.gov/climatechange.