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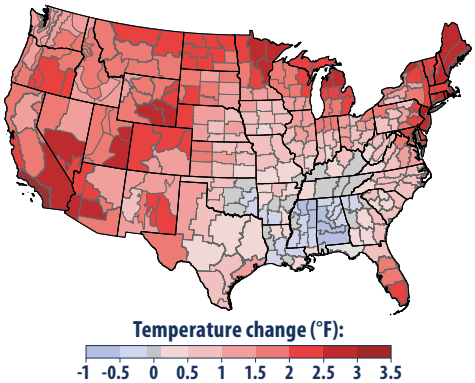
What Climate Change *Means for* Maine

Maine's climate is changing. The state has warmed about three degrees (F) since the year 1900. 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 fishing, agriculture, and winter recreation; and increase some risks to human health.

Our climate is changing because the earth is warming. People have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the air by 40 percent since the late 1700s. 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. Maine 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.

The Sandy River flooded Farmington in January 2006. Credit: Franklin County Emergency Management Agency.

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.

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Sea level rise threatens salt marshes like Scarborough Marsh, which is Maine's largest. Credit: Robert Pos, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ecosystems

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.

Climate change can allow invasive species to expand their ranges. For example, the hemlock woolly adelgid has recently infested hemlock trees near the coast in southern Maine. Infestation eventually kills almost all hemlock trees, which are replaced by black oaks, black birch, and other hardwoods. Warmer temperatures are likely to enable the woolly adelgid to expand inland and up the coast. The loss of hemlock trees would remove the primary habitat for the blue-headed vireo and Blackburnian warbler. It could also cause streams to run dry or become excessively warm more often, harming brook trout and brown trout.

Fishing and Farms

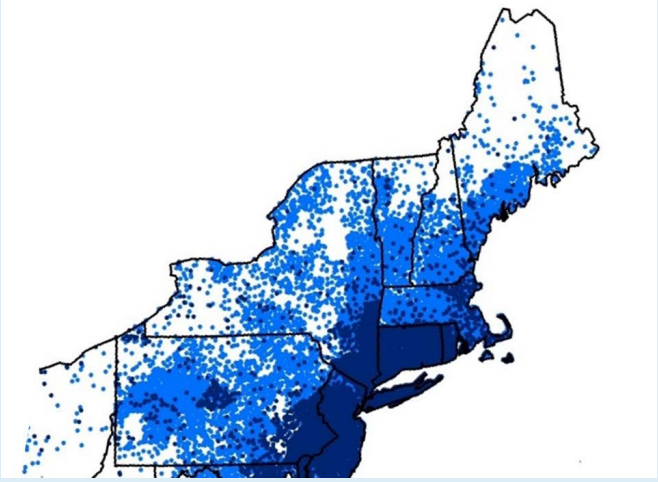
Parts of Maine's fishing and agriculture sectors may suffer as the climate changes. Rising water temperatures can lower oxygen levels and otherwise alter freshwater and marine ecosystems. Lobsters and other shellfish are vulnerable to increased ocean acidity, especially during early life stages when acidity impairs their ability to build shells. As ocean temperatures rise, some fish species are moving northward or into deeper waters to remain within their normal temperature range. The loss of coastal wetlands could harm clams, bass, and other commercially important fish.

Climate change may also pose challenges for agriculture. 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. Rising temperatures may also affect maple syrup production, but the likely impact over the next few decades is unknown.

Human Health

Climate change is likely to amplify some of the existing threats to health in Maine. Certain people are especially vulnerable, including children, the elderly, the sick, and the poor.

Warmer weather could increase the incidence of some diseases carried by insects and some respiratory conditions. 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 can also increase the formation of ground-level ozone (smog), a pollutant that can contribute to respiratory problems such as asthma. Finally, rising temperatures may increase the length and severity of the pollen season for plants such as ragweed, which has already been observed in other regions.



Increase in Lyme disease between 1996 and 2013. Each dark dot shows one case reported in 1996; light dots show 2013. The increased range shown here has been attributed to factors other than climate change. Nevertheless, additional warming will lengthen the season during which people are exposed to Lyme disease and may allow the disease to spread to colder areas. Source: CDC.

Winter Recreation

Warmer winters may bring more rain and less snow to Maine. A decline in snowfall would shorten the season during which the ground is covered with snow, which could harm recreational industries like skiing, snowboarding, and snowmobiling, and the local economies that depend on them.

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.

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