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Scientists: State must act on warming now

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Killer heat waves, epic flooding and the destruction of the state's famed coastline could await the future residents of New Jersey if state legislators don't take immediate action against global warming, a panel of scientists warned Tuesday.

In North Jersey, Newark Airport and stretches of the turnpike could remain underwater more often than not. In the southern part of the state, a rising sea could wash away the Jersey Shore, they said.

"It may not happen very fast. It may stretch out over a few centuries," Princeton researcher Michael Oppenheimer said. "The reality is we don't know, and you can't take a risk of that kind of thing happening."

Oppenheimer joined two Rutgers scientists at a state Assembly Environment Committee hearing Tuesday night in West Orange. Legislators are considering a tough new crackdown on greenhouse pollution blamed for climate change.

"We're now into unknown territory," said Jonathan Adams, a Rutgers professor who studies climate change history. "We've exceeded any level of these greenhouse gases that have existed for the past 650,000 years."

The legislation would require the state to reduce carbon dioxide and other industrial emissions by about 20 percent by the end of the next decade -- and allow for deeper cuts if deemed necessary. That won't come without any economic pain -- electricity, for one, will probably cost more to produce -- but the bill still seemed to have the support of much of the committee.

A vote to move it to the full Assembly is expected next Monday, legislators said at the hearing.

Global warming "could be the most important issue that our country faces," said Assemblyman Robert Gordon, a D-Fair Lawn. "While it is not too late to make the changes required, it is getting close."

The bill is similar to the executive order issued by Governor Corzine last week that calls for an 80 percent cut in emissions by 2050. Many scientists and environmentalists have said the bigger cuts will be necessary to prevent permanent damage to the climate.

Supporters of the legislation say it's needed to make permanent Corzine's global warming promise. The state can move in that direction relatively painlessly by promoting energy efficiency and conservation, advocates say.

But some economists say the deepest proposed cuts might eventually require tougher measures, such as new fees on energy use or gas-guzzling vehicles, and big spending on mass transit to get New Jerseyans out of their cars.

Oppenheimer and Rutgers Professor Alan Robock, who also testified Tuesday, both contributed to the landmark climate change report issued Feb. 2 in Paris. The report, a summary of work by thousands of researchers and governments, found "unequivocal" evidence of warming and said it was already contributing to stronger hurricanes and heat waves.

"There's no controversy anymore," Robock said. "The only explanation that makes sense is that it's caused by humans."

The scientists said some warming was now inevitable. Even if greenhouse emissions halted tomorrow, the state will likely end up with a climate closer to that of Virginia by the end of the century, they said. But without any cutbacks, Robock said, New Jersey's weather will be more like that of hot, humid Georgia or South Carolina.

The few studies of potential impacts in North Jersey say melting polar caps could raise sea levels and lead to more flooding in the Meadowlands or other low-lying areas. Oppenheimer, formerly chief scientist for the group Environmental Defense, said the worst-case scenario could bring a rise of as much as 20 feet by century's end -- smothering Newark Airport and the turnpike with water.

Flooding is "a problem that we can't handle successfully now," he said. "It's only going to get worse."

Despite the prospect of higher costs, some business groups told the legislators that they were ready to live with the new limits -- or at least were resigned to them. Cutting emissions is "a goal and a solution that we share and we want to make that work," said Steven Gabel, a consultant for an association of small energy-producing companies in the state.

Still, he warned of the bill's "vast impact" on the state economy if it wasn't drafted carefully.

Assemblywoman Lisa Stender, a co-sponsor of the bill, said doing nothing would be costly as well.

"The cost of reducing emissions now is insignificant compared to the loss of our coastal regions," the Democrat said.

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Strict measure

State legislators are considering some of the toughest greenhouse gas limits in the nation. Features of the bill:

- It would cut global warming emissions by about 20 percent by 2020.
- The state Department of Environmental Protection would have to come up with specific rules to achieve this reduction.
- The first limits would take effect in 2012. The DEP could order steeper cuts if need be to stop warming.
- The bill is modeled after a California program adopted last year by Democratic legislators and Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.
- The likely targets of greenhouse limits would include power plants, industry, automobiles and home heating and electricity use.

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