

Colorado communities launch climate resilience project

Rocky Mountain Climate Organization and the Colorado Municipal League convene planning process to help prepare communities for heat waves, wildfires and other climate-related disruptions

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Local governments around Colorado will prepare a blueprint for climate-change resilience in a new project launched under the auspices of the Colorado Climate Network and Colorado Municipal League.

In a report expected late this year or at the start of 2015, the Local Resilience Project will outline how the state's communities can get ready for longer heat waves, wildfires and flooding and other potential impacts of a warming global climate.

Colorado's average temperature is projected to climb between three to five degrees Fahrenheit by mid-century. Summertime increases in extreme heat are also projected, with the potential for widespread impacts to human health.

The state is prone to climate-related threats like wildfires, droughts and damaging storms and floods, said Stephen Saunders, president of the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization, which administers the Colorado Climate Network.

“Climate change is not an issue that can be addressed successfully by a jurisdiction acting alone and focusing solely within its own boundaries,” Saunders said, emphasizing that a collaborative, interregional approach will be critical to successful climate preparedness. “We will have participants from big metro areas to rural areas, defining ways they can work together to prepare our state to meet these challenges.”

Starting in late summer, work groups tasked with different assignments will identify possible actions for local governments and others to take to prepare for climate change impacts, and what's needed from the state and federal governments and other sources to make it happen.

The statewide effort could benefit from local climate preparedness plans that have been developed by a few local governments in Colorado, including Denver’s new climate adaptation plan, released today.

Denver's roadmap to climate adaptation and preparedness highlights three key areas relevant to other parts of the state: overall temperature increases and the urban heat island effect, extreme weather events, and shrinking water supplies.

"The Local Resilience Project will help give Colorado communities planning tools to prepare for more extreme weather," said Colorado Municipal League director Sam Mamet. "Cities and towns in different parts of the state will face different challenges, but sharing expertise and experiences in dealing with things like floods and wildfires is helpful for everyone," Mamet said, as his organization announced the Local Resilience Project in its latest newsletter.

Saunders said the report will help other Colorado and Rocky Mountain communities even if they're not directly involved in the resiliency project by providing a roadmap for climate preparedness. Working with the Colorado Municipal League will help ensure that the important information compiled in the report will reach elected officials and planners around the state, he added.

Some Colorado communities are already ahead of the curve when it comes to preparing for climate change impacts.

Fort Collins Mayor Karen Weitkunat, a member of President Obama's Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience, said her city has faced a series of major weather-related issues recently.

"Citizens expect their city to be prepared for the associated impacts from the events," Weitkunat said. "Our city is a leader in increased preparedness and resiliency to the effects of changing climate in our state," she said, adding that climate change adaptation and preparedness isn't a political issue — just good municipal governance.

"In addition to preparing for specific climate-related threats, local resiliency and adaptation can be seen as a key part of creating communities that are healthier and sustainable in the long run," she said.

Recruitment of elected officials, managers, and program staff for participation in the project has just begun. As of today, confirmed participants include representatives from:

The City and County of Denver, Boulder County, the City of Lakewood, the City of Fort Collins, the City of Arvada, the City of Boulder, Eagle County, the City of Aspen, the Town of Vail, and the Town of Dillon.