



The Oregonian

Land managers short on climate change data

Public land - Warming's effects aren't a big enough priority, a federal report says

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Federal agencies that manage nearly a third of the land in the United States and more than half of Oregon's land aren't adequately considering the effects of climate change, despite clear evidence that warming already is affecting public lands, the Government Accountability Office said Thursday.

Land managers for the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and other agencies oversee plans for logging, mining, water use, recreation, environmental protection, fishing, hunting and other activities.

But the managers "have limited guidance about whether or how to address climate change and, therefore, are uncertain about what actions, if any, they should take," the GAO said in the report issued to Congress.

Climate change is not a high priority for federal agencies, the report said, despite a 2001 Department of Interior order to include it in planning. That's a particular problem in the Northwest, where much of the snowpack is at relatively low elevations.

Panels of scientists, government experts and public land managers told the GAO that areas most vulnerable to warming include the snow-fed Columbia and Snake rivers, Cascade Range lakes such as Crater Lake and Diamond Lake, and Oregon's continental shelf coastal ecosystem.

Primarily spring-fed rivers, including the Klamath, McKenzie and Willamette, wouldn't be hit as directly but are still vulnerable because demand for their increasingly rare high water flows is likely to increase.

The Northwest probably will see more forest fires, fueled by higher temperatures, more frequent drought and increasing insect infestations, the report said.

Panelists told the GAO that the focus of the agencies -- and of the public -- must shift to addressing environmental and economic changes likely to result from global warming on public lands and in marine sanctuaries.

Gordon Grant, a research hydrologist with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station, was one of the panelists. The past 18 months have seen a dramatic rise in the consensus about climate change and the understanding of it, he said.

"What we may be facing in the future is a rethinking of forest management," Grant said. "In my view, we have only just begun to explore what the options might be."

A few examples: As temperatures rise, the Forest Service might emphasize different species of trees, require patterns of logging that retain snow longer, manage forests to increase groundwater retention and give higher priority to protection of vulnerable water resources.

Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., and John McCain, R-Ariz., requested the GAO report when Kerry was campaigning for president in 2004.

The 2001 Department of Interior order directed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and the BLM to consider climate change effects in land management plans. But agency officials told the GAO they haven't guided resource managers on how to put the order into effect.

Managers from the Forest Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have received

no specific direction about how to address climate change, the report said. The agencies said that they plan to remedy those deficiencies and that the GAO underestimated the amount of research and other work being done.

Panelists said Congress could order numerous improvements, including banking seeds of threatened plants, boosting data collection, increasing the quality of regional climate change forecasts and supporting the civilian satellite program, which is "on the verge of failing."

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