

Climate Change: What Is Happening In Alaska

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I recently attended a national Extension meeting on the topic of “climate change.” This was a comprehensive look at all the issues and data that is available and some strategies. We learned that climate in Alaska and northern Canada is changing,

but much of the data showed that the Midwest was not expected to change. The speakers emphasized that 5-year trends are meaningless variability, that model accuracy is limited to 30 years, and that planning should look at these impacts out to 50 to 100 years.

The big difference I saw is that University of Alaska and Extension understand the issues and are addressing how to adapt to the changes. They are planning for the changes rather than trying to mitigate or stop the change. Some of the issues discussed at the meeting included changing plant species, water and energy management, changes in weather severity, developing programs and plans for the changes, and looking at the positive impacts of climate change.

Temperatures dramatically started changing in 1976 and currently are 8 degrees warmer.

Northern Alaska has seen the polar ice move away from the shoreline, which has caused severe shoreline erosion. Winter temperatures are expected to warm more than 20 degrees.

Interior Alaska is seeing the permafrost melting, and new species of trees and shrubs are establishing. It looks like the growing season is getting longer, and now farmers can raise barley and are considering wheat production.

But with the higher temperatures, rainfall may limit production. June temperatures were in the 80s in Fairbanks. The southern Alaska winter temperatures are increasing to the point that some expect winters may be above freezing within a few years.

Losing the permafrost and exposing soil to erosion is a major concern across Alaska. Already, houses and roads are collapsing into holes caused by the permafrost melting.

University of Alaska and Extension are actively working on planning, assessing the changes and helping communities adapt to the changes. They have formed the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy (www.uaf.edu/accap) and SNAP, Scenarios Network for Alaska Planning (www.snap.eud.edu). Δ

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