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Scientists, public discuss impact of climate change in W.Va.

by Rachel Molenda, Staff writer



RACHEL MOLENDIA | SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

Angela Anderson, director of the Union of Concerned Scientists' Climate Energy Program, listens to John Bird after a panel discussion Saturday about how to discuss climate change in communities and take action based on those conversations.

DAVIS — A roomful of scientists, policymakers and environmental advocates didn't need to be convinced that the climate is changing, but they spent Saturday discussing ways to address climate issues even in communities where those conversations seem difficult to have.

"What we found about two or three years ago — we were frustrated, as were many folks who care about this issue and care about our environment deeply — was that you couldn't say the words 'climate change'

without invoking a very polarized response," said

Angela Anderson, director of the Union of Concerned Scientists' Climate and Energy Program.

Anderson said her organization is focused on altering the conversation about climate change throughout the nation, and this particular meeting, organized by the West Virginia Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative, was, in part, about "changing the conversation about climate change in your state."

About 165 scientists, students, activists and concerned community members gathered at Blackwater Falls State Park to discuss "Climate Change and the Highlands: What's at Stake — What's at Risk?"

"The economy and the ecology of the highlands is very much tied to this unique climate we have up here," said conference organizer Tom Rodd. "Species that are rare and endangered, the ski industry, outdoor recreation, timber and forestry — all those things are going to be dramatically affected by climate change."

West Virginia's Allegheny Highlands are an ecologically diverse area spanning multiple counties in the Eastern part of the state.

Conference attendees heard from scientists about the global impact of climate change: rising sea level, groundwater challenges and potential disasters related to the breach of glacial lakes throughout the world.

But Anderson said effective conversations about climate change need to start with the local effects.

Scientists at Saturday's conference shared data related to the effect of rising stream temperatures on brook trout, as well as projected temperature changes that could lead to the disappearance of the sugar maple, West Virginia's state tree. Potential increases in rainfall caused by climate change could make major flooding very real for people in the state, Anderson said.

"We have to start talking with people about what they're seeing all around them," Anderson said.

"Folks that aren't like all of us but like to be outside and love nature may care a lot about the increase in the heat waves that are going to happen, particularly in cities like Charleston and Huntington," Anderson said. "What are going to be the impacts of those heat waves on the people, particularly those who can't afford central air-conditioning?"

Panelists also said the nation and West Virginia need to acknowledge present and future challenges brought on by climate change.

Downstream Strategies, a Morgantown environmental consulting firm, is collaborating with the West Virginia University College of Law Center for Energy and Sustainable Development on a project related to the new carbon rules for coal-fired power plants, announced last week by the Obama administration.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Clean Power Plan" proposal seeks to curb emissions of carbon dioxide while maintaining "fuel diversity," with coal and natural gas each expected to continue to provide nearly a third of the nation's electricity.

Evan Hansen, president of Downstream Strategies, called the rules "flexible," and said that even though the EPA set state-by-state emission

limits, "they leave it to the states to figure out how to meet that limit."

"While our political leaders have decided, even before they read the rule, that they're going to sue, what we're going to do is actually look and read the rule and think about what the options are in West Virginia and what could be most cost-effective," Hansen said of the project. "How we could meet those requirements with the most jobs in West Virginia, do the most for the environment and get side benefits, as well?"

Last week, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin said the rule realizes "some of our worst fears," although the state Department of Environmental Protection hadn't yet finished reviewing the proposal. Tomblin was joined at a news conference in opposition to the rule by Rep. Nick J. Rahall, D-W.Va., Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., Attorney General Patrick Morrisey and officials from the United Mine Workers union and the West Virginia Coal Association.

"If you ever want to unify Republicans and Democrats in West Virginia, just have the EPA announce some new rules that involve the coal industry," Hansen said.

Downstream Strategies and the center plan to release a report for use by the state's leaders and also for the public, "so that they can hold our state leaders accountable."

Rodd said he believes the conference was a first for West Virginia and sought to share climate change research not only between scientists, but also with the public.

"The climate is changing with great variation all over the world," Rodd said. "I think it behooves anyone concerned about the problem to understand the impacts of climate change in their area."

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