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Climate change, Agenda 21 skeptics flood county meeting

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MOUNT VERNON — By the end of the century, fall flooding on the Skagit River will be more severe, catastrophic coastal flooding could happen every year and salmon could be further endangered by low summer runoff, a University of Washington climate scientist told a packed house Thursday morning.

Alan Hamlet, with the Climate Impacts Group, explained how climate change is expected to affect the Skagit River.

His talk focused on how greenhouse gases, like those created with the burning of fossil fuels, will cause Earth's temperature to rise.

"We have seen this very rapid rise in (carbon dioxide) due to human influence in the world," Hamlet said.

Hamlet had been invited to speak by Skagit County as part of Envision Skagit 2060, a grantfunded effort to take a look at how the county might plan for future growth. The audience consisted of county officials and members of the public, including some who are skeptical about climate change.

Using more than 600,000 years of glacial ice core data, scientists have mapped out historical levels of greenhouse gasses, Hamlet said. Predictions based on about 20 computer models shows that temperatures and sea level increases will continue into the future, even if the world's total greenhouse gas output levels off.

Specifically for the Skagit River basin, which covers more than 3,100 square miles from Snohomish County into Canada, fall flooding would likely increase because the snow level will rise along with the temperatures, Hamlet said. He added that since 1958, the snowline has risen by about 650 feet.

That's a concern for local flood managers. Operations Manager Daryl Hamburg with Dike District 17, which protects north Mount Vernon, said he needs clarification on the information that Hamlet presented.

These days, Hamburg said, flood events in the Skagit basin are generally spread over four days because the rain falls on snow, which releases the water over time. With Hamlet's prediction of climate change, there would be less snow to slow down the water, which would mean more damage from the same amount of rainfall.

"I take away from that going, 'Gosh, I hope not,'" he said of the predicted flood risk increase.

Hamlet also said that the Skagit's system of glaciers is likely to disappear by the end of the century, which means that summer river flows will slow to a trickle. That's a problem for coldwater species like bull trout and salmon, he said.

Several people challenged Hamlet during the question-and-answer period, including Don Easterbrook, a geology professor emeritus at Western Washington University and a renowned climate science skeptic. Easterbrook contested the numbers upon which the projections were based, including the amount of atmospheric water vapor, a greenhouse gas.

Hamlet said he was not convinced by Easterbrook's arguments because the data he sees includes "very good measurements of the water content in the atmosphere." Hamlet added that while specific temperature and sea level rise projections are often wrong, the general trend is an increase of both.

"What the climate models do give us is the trajectory, and they are so unambiguous about that trajectory going forward," Hamlet said.

One man asked why Hamlet used what he called “optimistic projections.” The man said the carbon dioxide and methane levels in the atmosphere are increasing, not staying level.

Hamlet said he could present a more dire scenario for future presentations. By the end of the century, the sea could rise between 6 inches, which takes the historical trend and extends it into the future, and 50 inches, which takes into account future greenhouse gas emissions, accelerated of land-based glacier melt and seawater expansion due to warmer temperatures.

“I don’t think it’s out of the question to see 4 feet of sea level rise in Puget Sound,” Hamlet said.

Tina Champoux - Wolner of Sedro-Woolley said she saw an ulterior motive in the presentation.

“We believe Envision Skagit 2060 is part of Agenda 21. It’s about controlling people,” she said.

According to the United Nations, Agenda 21 is a nonbinding accord that provides guiding principles to national and local governments to lessen humans’ impact on the environment. Some people believe it also is an attempt at worldwide political control.

Ellie Herr of Anacortes also was not convinced by Hamlet’s words.

“The science isn’t settled,” she said. “We just don’t know. ... We don’t have consensus on either side. This is all conjecture.”

Dick Spink, who said he owns land in the Marshall Islands, said residents there have not seen a corresponding rise in sea levels.

“We feel the (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) is a politically motivated organization,” Spink said. Later, he said, “This is about control.”

The meeting was video recorded and will later be shown on the county’s television channel, Skagit 21. The talk may later be streamed from the county’s website.

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