

Climate Change in the Empire State

Stretching from Lakes Erie and Ontario in the north and west to New York City in the southeast, New York is strategically connected both to North America's industrial heartland and the global service economy. In upstate and western New York, farming and rural landscapes still shape the character of the land. This summary highlights the potential impact of climate change on western and upstate New York's economy, its communities, and the places they love.

Scientists are now convinced that human activity, primarily burning fossil fuels to produce electricity and drive our cars, is changing our climate. These activities emit

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gases, principally carbon dioxide (CO₂), that blanket the planet and trap heat. Already, we are seeing signs of climate change throughout the Great Lakes region: average annual temperatures are increasing; severe rainstorms have become more frequent;

winters are getting shorter; and the duration of lake ice cover is decreasing.

Climate Projections

The latest, most reliable projections of future climate change combine 100 years of historical data for New York with the most up-to-date general circulation models of the Earth's climate system. In general, New York's climate will grow considerably warmer and probably drier during this century, especially in summer.

- **Temperature:** By the end of the 21st century, temperatures are projected to rise 7–13°F in winter and 7–14°F in summer. This dramatic warming is roughly the same as the warming since the last ice age. Overall, extreme heat will be more common.

- **Precipitation:** While annual *average* precipitation may not change much, precipitation is likely to increase in winter and decrease in summer. New York, then, may well see drier soils and perhaps more droughts.

- **Extreme events:** The frequency of heavy rainstorms, both 24-hour and multi-day, will continue to increase.

- **Ice cover:** Declines in ice cover on the Great Lakes and inland lakes have been recorded during the past 100–150 years, although this trend has been moderated in areas of lake-effect snow. Ice cover declines are expected to continue.

Potential Impacts from Climate Change

Water Supply and Pollution

New York depends on groundwater, fresh water from Lakes Erie and Ontario, and rainfall for drinking, agriculture, and industrial uses. As the state's upstate population of 3.8 million (2002) continues to grow, projected changes in rainfall, evaporation, and groundwater recharge rates will affect all freshwater users.

- Lake levels are expected to decline in both inland lakes and the Great Lakes, as more moisture evaporates due to warmer temperatures and less ice cover.

- Reduced summer water levels are likely to diminish the recharge of groundwater, cause small streams to dry up, and reduce the area of wetlands, resulting in poorer water quality and less habitat for wildlife.

- Pressure to increase water extraction from the Great Lakes will grow, exacerbating an already contentious debate in the region.

- Decreased water levels could reduce hydropower generation in the Great Lakes

region by a conservative estimate of 15% by 2050.

- Development and climate change will degrade the flood-absorbing capacities of wetlands and floodplains, resulting in increased erosion, flooding, and runoff polluted with nutrients, pesticides, and other toxins.

Human Health

Climate projections suggest that extreme heat periods are likely to become more common, as will severe storm events.

- Winter cold-related morbidity or mortality will decrease, while summer heat-related morbidity or mortality is likely to increase. Of particular concern is the large projected increase in extreme heat days (exceeding 97°F) by 2080–2100, which will require improved warning systems and preparation to avoid severe health impacts.

- Higher temperatures and more electricity generation for air conditioning increase the formation of ground-level ozone, likely exacerbating asthma and other respiratory diseases.

- Some waterborne infectious diseases such as *cryptosporidiosis* or *giardiasis* may become more frequent or widespread if extreme rainstorms occur more often.

- The occurrence of many infectious diseases is strongly seasonal, suggesting that climate plays a role in influencing transmission. Some diseases carried by insects such as Lyme disease (ticks) or, more recently, West Nile encephalitis (mosquitoes) have expanded across the region. While this spread is attributed largely to land-use changes, future changes in rainfall or temperatures could encourage greater reproduction or survival of the disease-carrying insects.

Property and Infrastructure

New York's western urban centers and other developed areas are particularly vulnerable to the risks of climate extremes, incurring direct economic losses or requiring costly adaptations.

- More frequent extreme rainstorms and floods, exacerbated by stream channeling and more paved



surfaces, result in greater property damage, place heavier burdens on emergency management, increase cleanup and rebuilding costs, and exact a financial toll on businesses and homeowners.

- Municipalities in New York will have to upgrade water-related infrastructure including levees, sewer pipes, and wastewater treatment plants in anticipation of more frequent extreme downpours.

- Lower lake levels have costly implications for shipping on the Great Lakes, requiring more frequent dredging of channels and harbors and adjusting docks, water intake pipes, and other infrastructure. Alternately, a longer ice-free season will extend the shipping season.

Agriculture

New York's agriculture generated \$3.4 billion in returns in 2001, with more than 37,000 farms producing a diverse array of products including livestock, poultry, dairy, fruit, feed grains, and vegetables. There are likely to be some positive impacts for agriculture resulting from a warmer climate, although current evidence suggests that the negative consequences could outweigh the positive. In general, however, regional development, technological advances, and market fluctuations will also influence farmers.

- Increased atmospheric CO₂ and nitrogen as well as a longer growing season could boost yields of some crops, such as corn and soybeans.

- Severe rainstorms and floods during planting and harvest seasons will likely depress productivity. Similarly, hotter and drier conditions during the main growing season also disrupt production and may require irrigation of currently rain-fed crops.

- Higher ozone concentrations can damage soybeans and horticultural crops, countering positive impacts of a warmer climate.

- Several climate changes will likely combine to create more favorable conditions for a number of pests and pathogens.



- With the climate projected to become unfavorable for maple trees by the end of the century, syrup production is likely to decline.

- Extreme heat and droughts can severely affect livestock health and production.

Recreation and Tourism

Tourism in upstate New York is almost exclusively outdoor-oriented, with boaters, hikers, campers, anglers, wildlife watchers, and hunters finding mountains, forests, rivers and thousands of ponds, wetlands, and lakes. It is the spectacular Niagara Falls and the beautiful Great Lakes shorelines that attract most visitors.

- Anglers on the Great Lakes and inland lakes will be affected by range shifts, loss of habitat, and increases or declines of their preferred catch. For example, the range of warm-water fish such as small-mouth bass or bluegill is likely to expand northward, while cold-water species and even some cool-water fish may disappear from southern parts of the region.

- The duration of summer stratification in lakes will increase, adding to the risk of oxygen depletion and formation of deep-water "dead zones" for fish and other organisms—especially in Lake Erie.

- The summer recreation season will likely expand as temperatures warm further, but extreme heat, heavy rains, elevated ozone levels, and possible increases in risk from insect- and waterborne diseases may dampen outdoor enthusiasm.

- Lower water levels coupled with warmer water temperatures may

accelerate the accumulation of mercury and other contaminants in the aquatic food chain.

- Earlier spring runoff, more intense flooding, and lower summer water levels generally mean growing challenges for New York's wetlands, which have already been significantly reduced by development and agriculture. Loss of habitat or food resources for migratory birds, shorebirds,

and waterfowl will affect New York's birdwatching and hunting industries.

Climate Change Solutions

New York residents, business leaders, and policymakers can help reduce the potential impacts from climate change by pursuing three necessary and complementary strategies:

- *Reducing heat-trapping gas emissions* by increasing energy efficiency in buildings, reducing dependency on coal-fired utilities by switching to renewable energy sources such as wind and bioenergy, increasing vehicle fuel economy, and investing in clean transportation.

- *Minimizing pressures on the environment* by improving air quality, protecting the quality and supply of water resources, protecting habitat, and limiting sprawl.

- *Preparing for those impacts from global warming that cannot be avoided* through better planning and emergency preparedness, adaptations in agriculture, strengthening public health response, and adjusting flood control infrastructure.

Governor Pataki's Climate Change Action Plan lays the groundwork for responsible environmental management by bringing government leadership together with business innovation. New York can lead the nation in effective solutions to climate change by becoming an exemplary steward of its own rich environment and resources in the face of climate change.



This fact sheet is based on the findings of *Confronting Climate Change in the Great Lakes Region*, a report published in April 2003 by the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Ecological Society of America. The report was written by regional experts under the leadership of George Kling (University of Michigan). The regional climate analysis was led by Donald Wuebbles (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

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The full report is available from UCS at www.ucsusa.org/greatlakes or call (617) 547-5552.