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The Sea Is Rising—What Now?

Article

MIAMI BEACH, Florida (Achieve3000, September 24, 2007). As more than two dozen scientists on a U.N. panel on climate change see it, it's just a matter of time before the rising sea level has global consequences. A report released by the panel predicts that the sea level will rise by three feet within 50-150 years. The lead author of the report, scientist Andrew Weaver, concluded that "It's going to happen no matter what—the question is when."

The Earth's sea level is defined by the average height of the sea around the globe. In the last century, the sea level has risen about eight inches. The rise may be a result of melting glaciers and disappearing ice sheets. It may also be the result of waters that expand because their temperatures have warmed. Scientists claim that these are all signs of global warming.

The possible consequences of the rising sea level are staggering.

The panel reported that three feet of sea level rise would flood about 25,000 square miles of land. And that's just in the lower 48 U.S. states. Cities, highways, airports, and historic monuments around the world would be flooded. Some could be completely submerged. Flooding will also make hunger and disease more common. It will also destroy animal and plant species, the panel reported.

Donald Boesch is a University of Maryland scientist. He said that these consequences are sparking "a national debate about what we protect and at what cost." Boesch and other experts say that spending billions of dollars to protect some coastlines will not be enough to save all of the areas in danger. In these areas, higher and more frequent flooding from extreme events such as hurricanes and storms, Boesch said, are causing the seas to swell even more.

Scientists have recommended three main ways for coastal areas to prepare for the rising sea level. However, none is perfect or cheap.

The first option is for people to abandon the low-lying areas and build farther inland. But many say that valuable and elaborate infrastructure in large, coastal cities like New York and Miami cannot all be abandoned.



AP Photo by Francesco Proietti

More extreme and frequent storms may cause the Earth's rising sea level to rise even more.