

Delaware braces for climate change

As Delaware summers get warmer and dryer over the next 30 to 50 years, the business owners that could have to adapt the most to climate change are the state's 2,451 farmers.

But with rapidly evolving hybrid seeds that could be more resistant to salt from flooding or salt water intrusion and installation of more irrigation systems, the industry should be able to thrive and continue to play a growing role as a regional, national and international source of both poultry and vegetable crops, said state Agriculture Secretary Ed Kee.

The great unknown: what happens if sea level rises and farm fields near the coast are permanently inundated?

"I don't have an answer for that," Kee said.

Kee was one of dozens of state, federal and local community officials who were joined Monday by leaders in conservation and industry for a state-sponsored workshop on climate adaptation and resilience.

The workshop grew out of Gov. Jack Markell's executive order that urged state cabinet officials to come up with a strategy for future climate change. The cabinet committee developed The Climate Framework for Delaware, which recommends a target of 30 percent greenhouse gas reduction by 2030, using a 2008 baseline, as a step to mitigate climate change.

In addition, they proposed 150 recommendations that state agencies could use to plan for future construction of schools, roads, bridges and other infrastructure, cope with impacts from more extreme heat days in the summer and plan for emerging issues such as diseases that are now found only in warmer places. In addition, they urged state officials to look at ways to prepare for sea level rise, increased and more intense storms and extreme heat – all possible outcomes as climate changes.

"This really encourages state agencies to look into the horizon," said David Small, secretary of the state Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. "If you ride along Del. 9, you know how vulnerable we can be. ... This is all about having this conversation in a little more structured way."

Monday's workshop was a chance to discuss some of the stumbling blocks and opportunities from mitigation and adaptation.

State environmental officials have prepared new maps that show how future flooding from storms could impact everything from roads and evacuation routes to where houses are built.

Among the questions asked Monday was how state transportation officials can best cope with storm events in the future, including taking steps to provide more high-ground locations to store vehicles during storms and shelters for bus passengers to protect them from heat, rain and cold.

For schools officials, there were tough questions about avoiding flood prone areas with new construction and increasing energy efficiency in school design.

And for business and tourism leaders, there was discussion about how to adapt so business and tourism continue to grow.

Kee said that if you just look at farmland adjacent to Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge marsh in Sussex County, you find 12 individual farm owners and some 1,200 acres of land.

In recent years, because of flooding during coastal storms, 600 acres has been flooded with salt water from Delaware Bay. The salt accumulated in the soil.

"It was rendered fallow," he said. "Over time, it may come back ... but that will be a long time."

State Rep. Rich Collins, R-Millsboro, said he farmed for 35 years and used to have a field near Prime Hook.

"I knew when it was time to quit," he said. "There's a lot of land, frankly, that probably shouldn't be saved."

But, Collins said, all land has value. He said he ended up selling that parcel near Prime Hook to a hunting club and got good money for it.

"I can deal with nature," Collins said. "But you can't trust government which can change regulations on a dime."

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