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US failing to adapt to climate change threats, says report

By Barney Jopson

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The [US](#) is not doing enough to adapt to climate change, which is already affecting every corner of America and threatening its supplies of water, food and electricity, according to a report for the White House.

As [President Barack Obama](#) seeks to build more support for action on climate change, which he wants to be part of his legacy, a comprehensive assessment blamed it for more extreme heat, wildfires, torrential rains and seasonal allergies.

“Despite emerging effects, the pace and extent of adaptation activities are not proportional to the risks to people, property, infrastructure and ecosystems from climate,” said the latest National Climate Assessment, released on Tuesday.

It said extreme weather would reduce the quality and availability of water, undermine food supplies by harming crops and livestock, and damage power plants and roads, citing the devastation caused by [Superstorm Sandy in 2012](#).

Although nascent planning to adapt to climate change is being done at all levels of government and some businesses, the report said “few measures have been implemented and those that have appear to be incremental changes”.

Mr Obama on Tuesday led a blitz of media interviews to publicise the warnings as John Podesta, counsellor to the president, said people were aware that climate change was happening but “they don’t feel that sense of urgency”.

The White House’s ability to spur adaptation is limited because measures depend on state and local governments, removing legal barriers, or securing funding from Congress, where many Republicans oppose climate change legislation.

“We’ve got a challenging context on Capitol Hill,” said Mr Podesta. “Hopefully this information will begin to change some minds up there and climate [change] deniers will recede.”

The report said the US could still reduce the gravity of the threats it described by continuing to cut its own emissions of greenhouse gases, but it said some additional climate change was already unavoidable.

As examples of adaptation measures already taken, John Holdren, the president's science adviser, cited a Philadelphia plan to deal with extreme heat and efforts by fish farmers in the Pacific Northwest to reverse the acidification of water.

The report's authors insisted that "the warming of the past 50 years was primarily due to human-induced emissions of heat-trapping gases", an assertion that some Republicans continue to challenge.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank that the [billionaire Charles Koch](#) played a role in founding, said the report "overly focuses on the supposed negative impacts from climate change".

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Obama laid out plans last year to prepare the US for the impact of climate change and cut greenhouse gas emissions.

There is no comprehensive national climate legislation in place, but he is using executive powers to cut carbon dioxide emissions from coal- and gas-fired power plants and to improve fuel efficiency standards for motor vehicles.

The warnings in the White House report had echoes of those in the [latest study](#) from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Those most vulnerable to climate change include the elderly, children, the poor and the sick, the US report said. Others are at risk because they live in floodplains, coastal areas, or urban areas where damage to one piece of infrastructure, such as the electricity grid, quickly has a knock-on effect on other essential services.