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Climate change report: More snow for Buffalo in future

By Jerry Zremski

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WASHINGTON – Buffalo may face a future with more lake-effect snow thanks to a warmer Lake Erie that will be more prone to harmful algae blooms and invasive species, the federal government said today in a comprehensive look at how climate change will affect local communities.

What's more, according to a new U.S. National Climate Assessment released this morning, there's plenty of evidence that global warming is already happening.

Temperatures in the Buffalo area were more than 1.5 degrees higher between 1991 and 2012 than they were between 1901 and 1960, placing the region among those nationwide that warmed up the most. And the report said that's just the beginning.

Depending on how successful the world is in controlling the amount of carbon dioxide and other planet-cooking gases into the atmosphere, average temperatures are likely to rise throughout the Buffalo region by between 4 and 9 degrees by the end of the century, the report said.

Temperatures are expected to increase across the country, which faces an array of dangers from global warming that in many cases are worse than what's in store for Buffalo.

Worst of all, researchers involved in the report said low-lying coastal cities like Miami and Norfolk, Va., will encounter a threat from rising sea levels while the Southwest should worry about more prolonged droughts.

“This is a key component of the president's climate action plan and an important tool for communities across the country that are planning for a future of increased climate risk,” John Podesta, counselor to President Barack Obama, said in a conference call with reporters this morning,

In Western New York, the report makes clear that the defining element of the local climate – Lake Erie – will face great changes.

Most notably, the percentage of the Great Lakes that is frozen over in the wintertime – which has fallen by half since the 1970s – will continue to shrink, said the report, which did not take into account the unusually wicked winter of 2014 and its near-record ice cover on the lakes.

Less ice on the lakes will mean a longer shipping season on the Great Lakes and a longer growing season for farmers, but those are among the few local benefits of climate change.

“Longer ice-free periods on the Great Lakes can result in more lake-effect snowfalls,” and a longer growing season could mean more trouble for local allergy sufferers, the report said.

In addition, warmer water in the Great Lakes could spell all sorts of other problems, the report said.

“Climate change will exacerbate a range of risks to the Great Lakes, including changes in the range and distribution of certain fish species, increased invasive species and harmful blooms of algae, and declining beach health,” the report said.

“Risks of waterborne illness, and beach closures resulting from heavy rain and rising water temperatures are expected to increase in the Great Lakes region due to projected climate change.”

The climate assessment – the federal government’s third and the first in five years – differs from some earlier projections that said the Great Lakes could experience lower water levels because of climate change.

Instead, without explanation, the new report said: “Current projections of lake level changes are uncertain.”

The report said, though, that the lakes’ shorelines will be more susceptible to erosion and flooding as stormy weather continues to increase.

Between 1958 and 2010, the amount of precipitation in the worst storms to hit the Northeast increased 70 percent, and that trend is expected to continue, the report said.

Precipitation is expected to increase in the Buffalo area by between 10 and 20 percent in the winter, spring and fall by the end of the century, although summers will see little change in rainfall.

On their morning conference call, Obama administration officials said the president will use the report to press his case for action to reduce carbon emissions in an effort to curb climate change.

Nevertheless, the report met a skeptical response from conservatives who have long argued that Obama has overplayed the potential impact of global warming.

“The report overly focuses on the supposed negative impacts from climate change while largely dismissing or ignoring the positives,” said Paul C. “Chip” Knappenberger and Patrick J. Michaels of the libertarian Cato Institute in an essay reacting to the climate report.