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Time for Virginia to change

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By Skip Stiles

© October 6, 2013

The International Panel on Climate Change just issued a report updating our understanding of climate change. Unfortunately, we in Virginia don't need an international report to know nature is on the move.

We're seeing ample evidence of change, with sea level rise and increased flooding, more intense rainfall - even fire ants showing up and overwintering here.

In 2007, the last time the IPCC issued a report, Virginia convened a Climate Change Commission to study how those global projections would fall upon the commonwealth and to figure out what we

should do about them.

In 2008, the commission (I was a member) projected that by the end of the coming century, Virginia would see 2 to 5 feet of sea level rise, 11 percent increase in storm intensity and about 3 degrees Centigrade temperature increase. We then developed a punch list of tasks needed to deal with these changes, most critically the increase in rates of sea level rise.

After the 2009 Virginia elections, what with the coming and going of moving vans at the governor's mansion, the list must have been misplaced. As a result, for the past few years, those of us in coastal communities have worked alone on our sea level rise punch list.

Better maps? Check - thanks to federal stimulus money, local and regional government funding and non-profit contributions.

Sea level rise included in local governments' long-range plans? Check - thanks to local government initiative, a supporting mandate from the state legislature, and some federal money slipped to local and regional governments by Virginia's Coastal Program and Virginia Sea Grant.

Old Dominion University started a Climate Change and Sea Level Rise Initiative, using funds from the Perry Family Foundation. The College of William & Mary's law school is looking at flooding problems coastal communities are facing, using funds from the Virginia Environmental Endowment and Virginia Sea Grant.

The Virginia Institute for Marine Science started developing strategies for coastal management in shoreline communities - the "supporting mandate" mentioned above - using bootlegged funds from other projects, since the state never funded this work.

With this patchwork effort over the past five years, we know in more detail how much water is coming and where. We also are getting a fix on what it's going to take to deal with it.

Then, two coastal legislators asked for a review of the impacts of "recurrent flooding," and a 2013 study by VIMS updated our estimates. Now we are looking at a minimum of 4 feet of sea level rise over 100 years, twice what the commission estimated in 2008.

At the same time, the federal government, nearly half of our regional economy, began to examine problems from sea level rise at its facilities. Naval Station Norfolk and Langley Air Force Base are being



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reviewed. So are the two Virginia facilities run by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

All of these studies are producing sobering results.

Just one snapshot: The new, \$1.9 billion space station supply contract at NASA Wallops depends on a barrier island launch facility that is only a few feet above sea level. A little more flooding, and we lose the island and all the money.

Extensive planning and expensive measures are needed, and these are beyond the reach of a rag-tag group of wet and worried folks in Virginia's coastal communities.

We've come as far as we can without state and federal help. The mayors of Hampton, Norfolk and Virginia Beach said that in unison last month at a "recurrent flooding" conference in Williamsburg.

So with the publication of yet another IPCC report, detailing increasing impacts with increased certainty, maybe it is time for Virginia to once again get serious about dealing with sea level rise and other climate change impacts.

State Sen. John Watkins, at that same Williamsburg conference, promised legislative action on sea level rise, a significant statement from a senior legislator representing a district well uphill from us.

And maybe, as he's moving into the governor's mansion, our next chief executive will find that five-year-old sea level rise punch list where it fell behind the fridge, dust it off, and take some long overdue action.

Skip Stiles is executive director of Norfolk-based Wetlands Watch. Email: skip.stiles@wetlandswatch.org. Virginia's misplaced "punch list" can be found at sealevelrisevirginia.net.

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AN EXTREMIST COMMENTARY

Submitted by John T Roberts, Norfolk, VA on Sun, 10/06/2013 at 3:17 am.

People like Mr. Stiles see what they want to see.

I was born in Norfolk and have lived here for more than 50 years. I know that scientists have measured a few inches of sea-level change here over the course of my life. Half of that change is due to land subsidence, because the Chesapeake Bay was created by the impact of a comet that fractured the Earth's mantle hereabouts.

Still, the impact of "rising seas" in the neighborhoods where I grew up and still frequent has been imperceptible to irrelevant over 5 decades.

I don't discount the science which shows that "rising seas" are real, but I challenge Mr. Stiles' assumption that the next 80 years of change will be more dramatic than the last 50 years of change that I, myself, have personally witnessed.

We are a "tide water" community. Changing shorelines and hydrology are natural facts of life here. Mr. Stiles' alarums over sea level rise in the coming decades are regrettably extremist.

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WAIT A MINUTE. WHAT ABOUT THE DEMONSTRATED PROBLEMS, MR. R?

Submitted by Steven T Corneliusen, Poquoson, VA on Sun, 10/06/2013 at 6:12 am.

I'm glad that Mr. Roberts's 50-year Norfolk experience has been unflooded. But what about the lower-lying neighborhoods that have been in the news in recent years? Newspapers not only in Virginia, but nationally, have portrayed sections of Norfolk as facing a real problem--an evolving problem. Are those reports hyped? What about the people interviewed for those articles, people who testify to an evolving level of flood peril? And the Navy's leaders--are they just idiots for raising Norfolk pier heights at huge cost?

Mr. Roberts began with the mildly ad hominem charge "People like Mr. Stiles see what they want to see." I'm wondering what Mr. Roberts himself sees not just in the news coverage, but in the photos. Are the photos rigged or something, Mr. Roberts? Or is it, at least to some extent, you yourself who sees only what he wants to see?

The real issue here, I'll bet, is the deeply polarized, increasingly nasty debate over human-caused climate disruption. Even if Mr. Roberts is somehow right about that broader issue--and about what

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he might call, inserting the letter u, "alarumism"--it seems to me that life in low-lying parts of Norfolk is not now what it was nearly 60 years ago, when I was a kid living by a creek in West Belvedere, a few doors down from Trinity Lutheran Church.

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HE DID NOT THAT NORFOLK HAS BEEN UNFLOODED

Submitted by Michael W. Herndon, Virginia Beach, VA on Mon, 10/07/2013 at 11:31 am.

he said the impact of sea level rise has been imperceptible - the flooding hasn't gotten any worse. Which correlates with my experience in the area over the last 30 years.

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I HAVE TO DISAGREE

Submitted by Lennart A. Rothman, Norfolk, VA on Mon, 10/07/2013 at 7:52 pm.

I have been here since getting out of the Navy in 1972. For a long time I lived in Larchmont near Cambridge Crescent. I recall walking my dog along the inlet where park benches would be underwater a few times a year.

When I left, that flooding occurred at least monthly. And recently I talked to a long time resident on Jamestown Cres. who lived in his father-in-laws home on the water there and he had to tear down his home for getting flooded 3 times in the last few years. He said the water is definitely higher.

My business has been near the Hague for over 40 years. I can attest that those beautiful homes on Mowbray between Mill and Pembroke have water on the street up to driveways and worse several times a month.

Subsidence and sea level rise is making an impact and needs to be address or all property values, even the higher elevations will suffer a great deal.

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HUH? IN FACT, SEA-LEVEL RISE *NOT* INCLUDED IN LONG-RANGE PLANS

Submitted by Steven T Corneliusen, Poquoson, VA on Sun, 10/06/2013 at 4:40 am.

In this op-ed, Mr. Stiles asserts that sea-level rise is "included in local governments' long-range plans."

Huh? What about post-Army Fort Monroe? It's a national-scale textbook example for this flooding issue. Almost all of that low-lying coastal public land became a national historic landmark a half-century ago. Yet the new national monument, over on the bayfront side, is deliberately split, sacrificing sense of place for private interests. And now even Skip Stiles has stopped blowing the whistle on the folly of overdevelopment planned there.

Consider: Unlike the Pilot, the Daily Press has sided with private interests during the entire eight-year struggle. A recent DP editorial enthused: "Existing structures would be used to create 400 units, and another 720 apartments, homes and townhouses would be built," even though "companies that would develop" Fort Monroe "must deal with...the threat of flooding."

Threat? No, inevitability. Companies? Developers don't care about future floods. They just pocket profits--and bankroll national-treasure-sacrificing politicians' campaigns.

It's no surprise that the DP would scant inevitable flooding. But how can anyone explain Skip Stiles's ignoring of it?

In the past, notably on Cathy Lewis's "HearSay," he has cautioned against anything but picnic shelters on that national treasure of a sand spit. But now Cathy ignores the issue too. She did so yet again in the most recent in her series of sea-rise discussions.

I don't get it.

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FACT: FIRE ANTS HAVE BEEN

Submitted by John H. Prince, Norfolk, VA on Sun, 10/06/2013 at 8:04 am.

Fact: fire ants have been here for several decades, if not more. This is not recent. Greater commerce in natural products from the Deep South have also brought in these ants in greater numbers unchecked.

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