

New Federal Climate Change Agency Forming

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Obama administration on Monday proposed a new agency to study and report on the changing climate.

Also known as global warming, climate change has drawn widespread concern in recent years as temperatures around the world rise, threatening to harm crops, spread disease, increase sea levels, change storm and drought patterns and cause polar melting.

Commerce Secretary Gary Locke and Jane Lubchenco, head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, announced NOAA will set up the new Climate Service to operate in tandem with NOAA's National Weather Service and National Ocean Service.

"Whether we like it or not, climate change represents a real threat," Locke said Monday at a news conference.

Lubchenco added, "Climate change is real, it's happening now." She said climate information is vital to the wind power industry, coastal community planning, fishermen and fishery managers, farmers and public health officials.

NOAA recently reported that the decade of 2000-2009 was the warmest on record worldwide; the previous warmest decade was the 1990s. Most atmospheric scientists believe that warming is largely due to human actions, adding gases to the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels such as coal and natural gas.

Researchers and leaders from around the world met last month in Denmark to discuss ways to reduce climate-warming emissions, and a follow-up session is planned for later this year in Mexico.

"More and more people are asking for more and more information about climate and how it's going to affect them," Lubchenco explained. So officials decided to combine climate operations into a single unit.

Portions of the Weather Service that have been studying climate, as well as offices from some other NOAA agencies, will be transferred to the new NOAA Climate Service.

The new agency will initially be led by Thomas Karl, director of the current National Climatic Data Center. The Climate Service will be headquartered in Washington and will have six regional directors across the country.

Lubchenco also announced a new NOAA climate portal on the Internet to collect a vast array of climatic data from NOAA and other sources. It will be "one-stop

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shopping into a world of climate information," she said.

Creation of the Climate Service requires a series of steps, including congressional committee approval. But if all goes well, it should be finished by the end of the year, officials said.

In recent years, a widespread private weather forecasting industry has grown up around the National Weather Service, and Lubchenco said she anticipates growth of private climate-related business around the new agency.

While most people notice the weather from day to day or week to week, climate looks at both the averages and extremes of weather over longer periods of time. And understanding both weather and climate, and their changes, are vital to much of the world's economic activity ranging from farming to travel to energy use and production and even food shipments and disease prevention.

Atmospheric scientists have long joked that climate is what you expect and weather is what you get. But greenhouse warming is changing what can be expected from climate, and researchers are seeking to understand and anticipate the impacts of that change.

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