

SCOMM

145:1



Alaska Climate Impact Assessment Commission

Rp. Ralph Samuels, Chairman / Rp. Reggie Joule, V-Chairman
State Capitol #204, Juneau, AK 99801-1182 / (907) 465-3727

March 1, 2007

The Honorable Lyda Green, President
Alaska State Senate
State Capitol #111
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

The Honorable John Harris, Speaker
Alaska State House of Representatives
State Capitol #208
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear President Green and Speaker Harris:

Pursuant to Legislative Resolve 49 / 2006, herewith submitted is the preliminary report of the Alaska Climate Impact Assessment Commission. The Commission will continue with its responsibilities throughout 2007, and make a final report to the legislature January 10, 2008.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature of Representative Ralph Samuels.

Representative Ralph Samuels, Chairman

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature of Representative Reggie Joule.

Representative Reggie Joule, Vice Chairman



AK Climate Impact Assessment Commission

Rp. Ralph Samuels, Chairman / Rp. Reggie Joule, V-Chairman

State Capitol #204, Juneau, AK 99801-1182 / (907) 465-3727 / fax - (907) 465-3810

PRELIMINARY REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

March 1, 2007

SUMMARY:

HCR 30 (Legislative Resolve 49 / 2006) established the Alaska Climate Impact Assessment Commission and charged it with assessing such effects under climate change in the Arctic, as would affect the citizens, resources, economy, and assets of the State of Alaska. The Commission is composed of two state House members, two state Senators, and seven public members appointed to specifically-defined seats, focusing on climatology/oceanography, communities, tourism, resource development, the economy, engineering/construction/ maintenance, and fish/wildlife/land management issues. Existing legislative staff has been tasked with supporting the work of the Commission. Authorized expenses include travel, per diem, and supplies.

The Commission is to hold at least eight public hearings throughout Alaska, and issue a report of its findings to the Legislature on January 10, 2008. To date, the Commission has held an organizing meeting, and two public hearings. The two public hearings, one each in Fairbanks and Juneau, were composed of invited professional testimony and open public testimony.

The Fairbanks hearing was held on the campus of the University of Alaska, and emphasized a scientific overview of the major climate change issues affecting Alaska. The Juneau public hearing emphasized state agency perceptions of state responsibilities, and in some cases, operational changes which are already underway due to climate warming in the Arctic. An Anchorage public hearing is scheduled for April, and the Commission will soon plan hearings to be held in rural Alaskan communities over the course of the summer and autumn.

The Commission considers existing evidence for Arctic warming trends sufficient to pursue its charge under HCR 30. Current science and climatology indicate that Alaska is a bellwether for climate change in the United States. Commission activities to date have focused on gathering and exchanging information, including anecdotal information, and evaluating it in terms of the Commission's responsibilities. The Commission will necessarily limit the scope of its investigation to provisions in HCR 30; it is not equipped to engage in major academic discourse on many of the unresolved issues within the climate change arena. Along with evaluating public testimony, the Commission has already begun discussing the framework of its final report due next year.

Commission members have participated in other climate change forums, including those organized by the Alaska Federation of Natives, the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy and the Department of Engineering at the University of Alaska (Anchorage), the Anchorage Business Roundtable and Resource Development Council, the 7th International Conference on Climate Change at the University of Alaska (Fairbanks), and upcoming, the Society of American Military Engineers and the Warming Oceans Forum to be held during the ComFish Alaska exposition in Kodiak. Other opportunities are anticipated throughout 2007.

SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITIES:

Under HCR 30, the Commission will assess the effects of warming trends on the citizens, natural resources, public health, economy, natural resource development, forest safety, fish and game utilization, transportation, communities, and resource development infrastructures. It is to estimate the costs of adverse climate change to our citizens and the state, recommend policy and regulatory changes, and identify and coordinate efforts of mutual concern with federal, state, and local entities.

In addition, the Commission will more specifically assess problems caused by flooding, erosion, and permafrost melt. To this end, it will identify specific circumstances of flooding and erosion where these affect life, property, economies, and resource development. The Commission is also obliged to examine prevention and mitigation measures for flooding and erosion problems. It may also recommend land use regulations, including standards for the designation of land prone to erosion and flooding.

DRAFT ACTION PLAN:

Over the remainder of 2007, the Commission will continue gathering and prioritizing information, participating in other public climate change forums, and preparing information for its final report. The Commission is already evaluating reporting formats from other governmental bodies and other relevant entities. The Commission's responsibilities will be viewed in the following major interest areas (not prioritized):

- 1) public health and communities (health, municipal impacts)
- 2) fish and game impacts (commercial, sport, subsistence)
- 3) forest impacts (state and federal assets, wildfire suppression, related economic issues)
- 4) economic impacts (tourism, construction, transportation, insurance, federal spending, agriculture, and flooding/erosion/permafrost damage)
- 5) resource development (oil and gas, mining, support industries)
- 6) policy and regulatory aspects (land use, alternative energy, other legislation / regulation changes)
- 7) state assets at risk (harbors, bridges, roadways, airports, parks)

OBSERVATIONS FROM ALASKANS:

A sampling of observations by Alaskans thus far conveys the diversity of impacts being felt by citizens and communities: Unusual, double-crops of blueberries in the Interior; salmon stocks and other species moving northward; waning birch forests in the Interior and declining yellow cedar stocks in the Southeast; increased frequency and intensity of wildfires; negative implications for continued insurance protection for coastal and riverine communities affected by storm surge, flooding, and erosion; a lack of adequate federal, state, or local data for mapping Alaska's areas at risk; emerging impact costs for state infrastructure; and the need for interagency coordination between local, state, and federal officials, including specially chartered entities such as the Denali Commission. These are but a few of the manifestations of climate change which have come forward.

LOOKING AHEAD:

It is expected that the Anchorage public hearing will offer insight from resource extraction industries, construction and engineering interests, research entities, and federal agencies, to name a few.

As the Commission anticipates public hearings in rural areas, particularly in coastal areas, it expects to concentrate in some detail, on flooding and erosion issues, impacts on the subsistence lifestyle, threats to small communities, and fish and game resources.

Ultimately, the biggest challenge facing the Commission will be to focus on and prioritize those issues within the scope of Arctic climate change, which most substantially impact the state, its people, and its economy. Consolidating the panel's findings into useful, relevant information will remain our objective. The potential exists for some measure of positive economic change due to Arctic climate warming. Although speculative, benefits may be seen in Alaska's fisheries, agriculture, and academic research fields, among others.