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Contact: Clinton Bennett, DHSS: (907) 269-4996, cell: (907) 500-4993

State Report Identifies Adverse Health Impacts of Climate Change

January 8, 2018, 2018 ANCHORAGE - The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services' Section of Epidemiology released a report today that outlines how the health of Alaskans could be affected by climate change. The report, ["Assessment of the Potential Health Impacts of Climate Change in Alaska"](#) highlights physical and mental health challenges that Alaskans are currently experiencing and could experience in the future due to warming temperatures and major weather events related to climate change.

"Temperatures in Alaska have warmed faster than the rest of the United States," said Dr. Jay Butler, Alaska's Chief Medical Officer and Division of Public Health Director. "This report is one resource for communities as they work to identify potential health problems as a result of our state's changing climate and as they prepare to address and prevent emerging health issues."

The report provides examples of health problems related to climate change including, but not limited to:

- **Mental Health and Well-being:** Anxiety and depression could increase as communities experience unwanted changes in their environment. This includes thawing permafrost, floods, and major storms that damage roads and buildings and force some communities to relocate.
- **Accidents and Injuries:** Droughts, floods, and storms are expected to increase with climate change and cause more injuries. Vehicle accidents may increase as thawing permafrost and changing weather conditions cause damage to highways, railroads, and airstrips.
- **Exposure to Hazardous Materials:** More wildfires in the Arctic are expected to occur, increasing the risk of lung and heart disease exacerbations among the elderly and those who are already sick.

- **Food, Nutrition, and Subsistence Activity:** Thinning sea and river ice is making hunting more dangerous. Hunting subsistence foods may also become more difficult with thawing permafrost and other environmental changes.
- **Infectious Diseases and Toxins:** Increasing temperatures and changing weather could lead to the introduction of new diseases transmitted by insect bites in Alaska, e.g., West Nile Virus.
- **Chronic Diseases:** Warmer temperatures in Alaska have led to earlier and longer pollen seasons, which can worsen seasonal allergies and asthma.
- **Water and Sanitation:** Coastal erosion, major storms, and flooding have already caused damage to community water systems. Further damage to drinking water, wastewater, or storm water systems could increase waterborne diseases and limit access to clean drinking water.
- **Access to Health Services:** Thawing permafrost, erosion, wildfires, and floods could make travel and access to health clinics more challenging.

Climate change will impact communities in different ways, meaning that actions to prepare for and adapt to climate change will need to be different, depending on the needs and priorities of each community. An initial step that local communities can take is to identify and prioritize the potential health impacts that will be most relevant to their community and, for each identified impact, determine the expected timing and magnitude of the effect. Other examples of strategies that communities can consider include, but are not limited to:

- Developing and participating in local and statewide climate change advisory groups, assessments, and adaptation plans;
- Offering community members opportunities to relay their concerns about climate change and propose solutions;
- Including human health in community vulnerability assessments for climate change; and
- Assuring an adequate workforce capable of performing climate change research, surveillance, and adaptation.

More specific adaptation strategies are also provided, such as reviewing architecture and engineering designs to ensure that plumbing infrastructure can withstand changes to the underlying permafrost, and if not, considering ways to address the problem; supporting successful community-based mental health wellness programs; and developing community response plans for wildfires.

[Read the full report here](#)

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