

New regional plan proposes 'climate adaptation'

By Matthew van Buren

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A newly released plan for Taos County approaches climate change as inevitable and suggests ways in which the county should change to deal with its looming effects.

The Forest and Water Climate Adaptation plan, which explores the issue from a variety of perspectives, was created using a grant obtained by the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps. Town of Taos Planner Matthew Foster was its primary author.

"This plan is adaptation. It's not mitigation," he said. "As a long-range planner, it's a topic I'm really interested in." Where mitigation seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to prevent climate change, adaptation accepts climate change as an inescapable force whose effects are already being seen in Taos County and around the world.

"The impacts of climate change are occurring more rapidly in the American Southwest than in other regions," the plan states. "These impacts will change our lifestyles permanently, as everything we do as individuals, families and communities will be affected by climate change."

Adaptation, according to the plan, "seeks to increase a community's resilience to the imminent impacts of climate change."

"The climate has already changed," Foster said. "We can expect more droughts, less snow, more risks of forest fire and so forth."

The plan identifies risks associated with climate change, including extremes in surface water flow, from large floods to inadequate water supplies, prolonged drought that could lead to "catastrophic" wildfires and reduced watershed health, and declining water quality due to erosion and ash, as well as associated effects on Taos County's economic health and "built environment." The plan indicates Taos County's infrastructure would be threatened by increased flooding and wildfires, and higher temperatures for longer amounts of time "will increase demand for energy-intensive air conditioning."

With increased air temperatures, the plan suggests Taos County can expect shorter winters and longer summers, which would impact skiing, rafting and the availability of water in general. Higher temperatures could also lead to increased evaporation, "causing losses of soil moisture and consequent soil desiccation."

Forest resources could also be affected, according to the plan, by an increased risk of wildfire, trees being replaced by shrubs and grasses, fish, birds and mammals being threatened and the "likely" introduction of invasive species.

The plan also outlines opportunities climate change may create in the region: a longer growing season, increased interest in sustainable energy and accompanying educational and employment opportunities, advanced preparedness for further changes, and opportunities for collaboration among all levels of government as well as community groups, among others.

The plan calls for cooperation among governmental and other organizations into the future, with climate adaptation being incorporated into mission statements, comprehensive plans and ordinances, and updated research and monitoring of climate change being made a priority.

“That seems to be the number one strategy,” Foster said.

The plan does lay out a timeline for education and implementation, and Foster said developing coordinated policies to protect forest and water resources is key to dealing with climate change. He said the next step is to set priorities.

“This plan doesn’t do that yet,” he said.

Foster said Taos County does have a model on which to base, at least in part, future stewardship efforts.

“Thank God for Taos Pueblo, because they don’t get enough acknowledgment,” he said. “They’ve got the source of our water.”

Foster said others can look to Taos Pueblo for ideas about how best to manage open spaces and preserve the health and integrity of watersheds, adding that mirroring Taos Pueblo’s practices and “culture of stewardship” could benefit everyone in the county. He said climate adaptation is still a relatively new approach to climate change, and one of the big challenges will be to educate the public and get the community to accept that climate change is happening, and it is too far along to stop.

The adaptation plan is still in its draft form, and Foster said he hopes for feedback from the public as the plan is revised and expanded. Electronic copies of the plan are available from Foster at mfoster@taosgov.com.

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