

Climate conference: State warming, but drying in question

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HELENA — Research indicates Montana will continue to grow warmer through global climate change, but whether the state also will become drier is unclear, speakers said Saturday at a climate conference sponsored by groups as diverse as the Montana Logging Association and Defenders of Wildlife.

Wild ducks will be among the big losers if the climate becomes not just warmer but also drier, University of Montana wildlife biologist Dave Naugle said. Ducks will move east to the Dakotas, Minnesota and Iowa, which cannot match Montana for landscapes unbroken by farming and other activity, Naugle said.

"These are critters that need vast landscapes with lots of grasslands and lots of wetlands," he said. A fragmented landscape presents many challenges for ducks, including greater vulnerability to predators, Naugle said at the Helena conference titled "The Climate Challenge: Strategies for Montana's Future."

Climate studies in western Montana show spring weather arrives about two weeks earlier than it did 50 years ago, said UM ecologist Steve Running, a climate-change authority. Mountain snowpack used to begin melting in early April, but now starts melting two to four weeks earlier, Running said.

"All around the (Pacific) Northwest, it's the same message," he said.

"Winters are ending earlier and its warming up quicker in the spring."

That lengthens the growing season for plants and causes forests to dry sooner, lengthening the wildfire season, he said.

Other speakers Saturday included Bill Gerwing, environmental policy director for energy company BP America, a sponsor of the conference.

Whether human activity has influenced global climate change no longer is debated much, Gerwing said. It is acknowledged as a cause, and the discussion has shifted to "how do we go forward from here," he said.

BP is working to "get our own operations in shape" environmentally and has launched a major effort to advance alternative types of energy, such as biofuels, Gerwing said.

Also represented at the conference was the Apollo Alliance, which promotes U.S. energy independence and has a steering committee that includes the Sierra Club and the United Steelworkers.

The climate-change and energy issues are rapidly bringing together groups that have considered themselves opposites, said Jerome Ringo, president of the Apollo Alliance and chairman of the National Wildlife Federation, another sponsor of the Helena conference. There is a measure of coalescing not seen in the United States since the civil-rights movement championed by Martin Luther King, Ringo said in an interview.