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### **Climate change conference scheduled in Helena**

**By PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian**

Montanans from all walks of life and from all corners of the state will be looking for a coherent message on global warming to send to lawmakers this weekend in Helena.

Nearly 40 different corporations, industry and agricultural associations, conservation groups, government agencies and universities are sponsoring the conference, titled "The Climate Challenge: Strategies for Montana's Future."

"Montana is a very well-known place to recreate with plenty of outdoor opportunities," said Sterling Miller of the National Wildlife Federation, one of the event's organizers. "We may be losing some of the things we value in Montana because of global warming."

Climate change and its potential impacts on wildlife populations has been a priority issue for the National Wildlife Federation for years, he said.

The issue of climate change is resonating across the state.

On Tuesday, 23 Montana conservation, faith, agriculture, social justice and sportsmen's groups joined with nearly 400 groups and prominent individuals around the nation to call for a federal limit on the kinds of pollution many believe augment global warming.

"Global warming will increasingly inhibit the possibility of a sustainable future for Montana and for the West," said Jill Davies, interim director of the Western Sustainable Agriculture Working Group in Victor. "Global warming will have a significant impact on agriculture, in terms of temperature extremes, water availability, extreme weather events, as well as creating greater instability of complex ecosystems upon which all life depends."

The group's policy statement called for reducing global-warming emissions by 60 percent to 80 percent by 2050 and promoting clean and efficient energy sources.

"It is time to use Montana's technological know-how to reduce pollution and build a stronger economy by leading the world in the creation of new, clean energy. But without a clear federal policy, we just won't see the aggressive innovation and investment in new technology and clean energy that we need," said Anna Swanson, representative for the National Environmental Trust in Missoula.

Short of a national policy, Miller said, short-term solutions will have to begin on the local level. This weekend's conference will bring together experts on agriculture, industry, economics, climate change and conservation to both inform and help begin discussions on what Montanans should do, he said.

Tracy Houck, executive director of the Montana Farmers Union, said she hopes to come away from the conference with some ideas on how to help Montana farmers suffering from a decade of drought. The Farmers Union helped sponsor the event.

Climate change offers both challenges and opportunities for Montana producers, Houck said.

As the nation begins to look for alternative energy sources, producers might benefit by growing oil seed crops or putting windmills on their property. At the same time, if the drought deepens, it's going to get harder to grow anything, she said.

"Farmers should be planting winter wheat right now. In some places, it's so dry that they can't," Houck said. "If you go out and ask a farmer, 'Is this all caused by global warming?' he'll probably say, 'I don't know.'"

"It's not his job to know. It's his job to figure out a way to react," Houck said. "Overall, everyone would likely agree that something is different, and now they just need to find a way to react to it."

Ellen Engstedt, executive director of the Montana Wood Products Association, isn't sold on global warming, but that didn't keep the association from being a conference sponsor.

"I think this whole issue of global warming is blown way out of proportion," said Engstedt. "I've seen a lot of science on both sides of the issue."

While temperatures have been increasing for the last decade, Engstedt said, this country saw a larger increase during the 1930s.

"There's just more to it than what we've seen so far. It could be global warming, but I don't think we know for sure," she said. "I do know that trees are a wonderful source of oxygen and do a good job of cleaning the air we all breathe."

Living trees also sequester carbon, she said.

"Dead trees don't contribute any of that to the environment," Engstedt said. "This summer, over 8 million acres burned throughout the U.S. and a lot of it was forested lands. ... In order for the forest to do the right things, it has to be healthy."

"Our forests aren't healthy right now," she said. "There's a lot of work that needs to be done to make them healthy."

By the end of the conference, Miller hopes the different groups will have started discussions that will eventually lead to a document on global warming that the next Montana Legislature will consider adopting as a resolution.

"We have to make progress on a local level," Miller said. "If we don't, our children and grandchildren will pay the consequences. The tools are available now. We just have to have the will."

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**Want to go?**

"The Climate Challenge: Strategies for Montana's Future" will be held Friday through Sunday at the Red Lion Colonial Inn in Helena. For more information, visit <http://www.mtclimatechallenge.org> or call Sterling Miller of the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula at 721-6705.