

How Climate Change Impacts Idaho's Pocketbook

U of I's McClure Center Leads Economic Assessment on Climate Change in Idaho

More than 500 people from across Idaho met in 2017 to discuss the future of the state's economy in a changing environment.

Business owners, government officials, university faculty and nonprofit leaders all attended Safeguarding Idaho's Economy in a Changing Climate, a two-day conference to discuss how Idaho can adapt its financial system to a more variable and shifting climate. The top two recommendations were to gather information on how climate change will alter state and local economies and to conduct local summits for regional discussions.

"We need to start thinking how as a state do we adapt to this," said [Katherine Himes](#), director of the University of Idaho's [James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy Research](#). "For example, how do businesses change their supply chain? Or how does a small town with revenue based on tourism rethink its economy? We can't put the economy on hold and hope a silver bullet comes along."

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Katherine Himes, director of the James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy Research.

A Two-Year Assessment

In response to that meeting, Himes initiated the Idaho Climate-Economy Impacts Assessment, a two-year project to evaluate the economic impact of climate change on Idaho. The McClure Center is convening the project, which will involve more than 100 researchers from Idaho.

As part of the economic assessment, researchers will synthesize all available data on projected changes to Idaho's environment and then identify how these changes impact major economic sectors including agriculture, energy, human health, recreation and tourism, land and infrastructure.

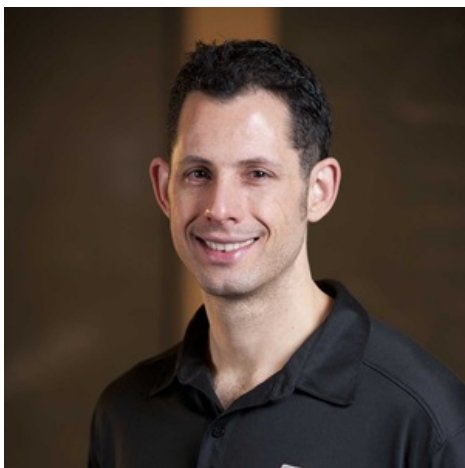
The team will not only look at the risks climate change poses but also identify opportunities for innovation, economic development and job creation across the state.

The project is funded by a consortium of businesses, nonprofits, foundations and private individuals. An advisory board with leaders from industry, nonprofit and government organizations will also be involved.

"This is truly a grass-roots effort in looking at climate change. We're at least a decade behind our neighboring states on trying to understand climate change impacts across the state," said [John Abatzoglou](#), a climatologist and associate professor in the [Department of Geography](#).

John Abatzoglou

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Gathering the Data

Idaho's researchers have access to data on certain effects of climate change like temperature, water availability and crop production, but the team will need to figure out how these influence the Gem State's pocketbook.

For example, [Alex Maas](#), an assistant professor in the [Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology](#) who will focus on recreation and tourism, knows the number of snow storms and the length of the ski season can impact revenue.

But he also knows Idaho's ski and snowboard economy will be affected by what happens in other states. If Colorado or Montana ski seasons worsen and Idaho's stays static, people may opt for Idaho resorts instead of mountains in other states.

“We have an opportunity to identify which sectors are going to be affected in other states and get ahead of the game and try and provide those recreation or tourism opportunities here,” Maas said.

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Evaluating Smoke

With wildfire increasing in the West, Abatzoglou will be leading a case study on the impacts of wildfire and smoke on Idaho's economy. That study will try to cover the costs from increased hospital visits because of air quality issues, structure loss and the disruption of commerce as a result of fire.

“The impact of fire doesn’t end when the fire’s put out,” Abatzoglou said. “The comprehensive cost of wildfire can be 50 to 100 times that of fire suppression costs.”

He said there may also be more subtle impacts of smoke, including modified plant growth following a blocked-out sun and a decreased market value of wine grapes because of a changing aroma.

Maas also makes the point that the team will need to try and place a dollar amount on things that generally don’t have a market value, like missing a day of jogging because it’s too smoky.

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— Katherine Himes, director, U of I’s McClure Center

A Living Report

The economic assessment’s final products will be made into an online interactive public information source. Himes hopes communities can use the website to identify opportunities for economic growth.

In addition, project members are participating in community summits across the state to talk with local members about more regional economic concerns and learn about research questions people want answered.

“We want to talk with community members, because they’re out there on the ground and live the economic impact every day,” Himes said. “I want everyone in Idaho to have the opportunity to say, ‘Yeah, as a community, as a city council, as a mayor, as a student, I could make a recommendation on how our economy could still be vibrant, even as the climate changes.’”

Article by [Leigh Cooper](#), University Communications and Marketing.

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