

Staying Afloat Amid Climate Change

BY FREDERICA WILSON 2/15/2015

South Florida is Ground Zero for the effects of climate change. With 2.4 million residents living no more than four feet above sea level, we have little room for error and no time to waste.

According to the U.S. National Climate Assessment, sea levels rose about eight inches last century and are predicted to rise anywhere from one foot to four feet in the coming century. If a two-foot change happened right now in Miami, it would put 25,000 homes underwater, flood more than \$14 billion worth of property and submerge 134 miles of roads.

While an underwater Miami might seem impossible to imagine, students at Florida International University are already painting the picture. They built models of the city showing the impact of three-, four- and six-foot sea-level rise, which are now on display at the Coral Gables Museum. The students were also preparing to look at the effects of a ten-foot sea level rise — a scenario that's not out of the realm of possibility — but they said, at six feet, "the whole map disappeared."

In the face of these devastating potential effects of climate change, South Florida is taking action.

The Southeast Florida Regional Climate Action Plan, including Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Monroe counties, has laid out recommendations for how to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.

In addition, Miami-Dade has its own climate action plan to research possible responses to climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emission levels by 80 percent in the next 35 years.

First lady Michelle Obama has taken notice of Miami's efforts. She invited Miami native Nicole Hernandez Hammer as one of her personal guests to the president's State of the Union Address. Hernandez Hammer is a climate activist with Moms Clean Air Force — a coalition of parents fighting against air pollution and climate change — and works with South Florida coastal communities to combat rising sea levels.

Facing an uncertain future, we must do all that we can to prepare by thinking globally and acting locally.

The Obama administration made progress in 2014 when the president forged a bilateral agreement between the United States and China to place a cap on carbon emissions and created the first regulations on power plants under the president's Climate Action Plan. The Environmental Protection Agency proposed regulations that will cut carbon emissions from existing power plants by as much as 30 percent by 2030.

Preliminary talks were held last year in Lima. The countries present discussed domestic plans to reduce harmful emissions. These talks will continue in December at an international summit in Paris.

For those of us in South Florida already working on responding to the potential risks of climate change, we must call on Congress and the Florida Legislature to follow our lead. I ask my colleagues to pass smart energy policies that cut carbon emissions and promote production of renewable fuel.

In Congress, my focus has been on creating jobs and ending the unemployment crisis while addressing environmental concerns. That is why I introduced the American Jobs Act, a bill that creates green jobs and promotes green infrastructure development, and the Homeowners' Defense Act, a bill that helps ensure the availability and affordability of homeowners insurance for the kinds of catastrophic natural disasters that climate change makes more prevalent.

Ultimately, policymakers must come to understand that energy transformation can be the best policy for reducing unemployment and increasing resilience: We need to put Americans back to work upgrading vulnerable and inefficient infrastructure and installing the clean, green, low-cost energy systems of the future.

I am deeply heartened by the progress our community has made so far, but we must do much more to ensure that South Florida's future stays afloat.

U.S. REP. FREDERICA WILSON OF MIAMI REPRESENTS FLORIDA'S 24TH DISTRICT IN CONGRESS.