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Costs of climate change already being felt



Canada could spend as much as \$43 billion annually by 2050 because of climate change, a new report says.



BY GORDON HAMILTON, VANCOUVER SUN
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Higher costs for city water, rising home insurance rates as sea levels rise and programs to encourage people to leave their fossil fuel-burning cars at home were cited Tuesday as ways that climate change is, or soon will be hitting home for B.C. residents.

That was the message from a panel at the opening session of BC Hydro's 2011 Power Smart Forum speaking on how a changing climate is affecting the business environment. Business, government and residents need to begin adapting so that the province will be more resilient as climate change impacts become more obvious, panelists said.

Research and talk about climate change are no longer enough, said Deborah Harford, executive director of Adaptation to Climate Change at Simon Fraser University. She said costs that business and service providers will face include increased impacts on health, on energy production, on food services and on population movements due to rising sea levels.

And as the impacts increase, she said insurance companies will probably start raising rates if infrastructure has not been planned and developed to adapt to climate change.

Bob Purdy, of the Fraser Basin Council, said issues like climate change are complex but actions can be taken, like reducing emissions on transportation fleets which also save costs.

Harford said most British Columbians likely do not understand adaptation to climate change.

“They would say “Do we need this?”” she said of expenditures now to meet the pending changes.

Local governments are already adapting by undertaking long-term measures, she said, citing some of the initiatives at the City of Vancouver.

Peter Judd, general manager of Vancouver’s engineering services, said the city has already implemented programs, like the downtown bicycle lanes, that are responses to climate change. Strategies are also underway on how to adapt to climate-induced changes to the city’s water supply, which will likely be affected by drier summers.

Judd said drinking water will be more expensive. In a later interview, he expanded on the water issue, saying the city is ready to begin requiring new residential housing to have water meters installed beginning Jan. 1, 2012. City council’s final approval is all that’s needed.

There will also be a rate structure to encourage residents to cut back on their water use, he said, but added that ultimately, the need to conserve will mean water rates are going to go up.

“The thing that we have an opportunity to do here is to actually reduce the long-term costs. If we can reduce the amount of water we are using, we can put off or eliminate major expenses like raising the dams in the region,” he said.

“One of the challenges that we have is that we expect to be facing hotter, drier summers and more intense storms in the winter. The response to some of those things, like water conservation and drought-resistant plants, are the kinds of responses that you need to address,” said Judd.

He said the prospect of rising sea levels is one of the biggest challenges the city is struggling with now.

And the city’s controversial downtown bike lanes, he said, are part of the city’s climate change strategy. They are aimed not only at today’s bike commuters, but also at the next generation.

“We have to make sure there are alternatives for people who haven’t started driving yet.”

Judd also said the city is adapting to more severe and more frequent storms by increasing the size of the storm sewer pipes. The primary need is to replace the old system where storm drains and sewage were combined in a single pipe, but at the same time the city is putting in wider pipes dedicated solely to storm run-off, he said. Already, the city has recorded an increase in rainfall along with more severe rainstorms.

Greg Reimer, vice-president of transmission and distribution at Hydro, said conservation is the best option for the corporation in meeting future energy demand. The Clean Energy Act requires Hydro to meet 66 per cent of its incremental needs through conservation by 2020, he said.

"We are on track to do that," he said. Smart metres, being introduced now, will help Hydro achieve that goal, he said.

Reimer said by the end of December, 2012, Hydro will have installed 1.8 million smart metres.

In a later email statement to The Sun, Reimer said Hydro has no plans at this time to introduce variable rates once the metres are in place.

"We will not be adopting time of use rates as we have a flexible enough system to meet demand. We do not need those rates to stimulate energy conservation." Reimer said.

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