

Alabama Avoids Preparing for Rising Seas Menacing Mobile

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When Kevin Harrison talks to Alabama lawmakers about the waters that scientists say will inundate the bridges, ports and highways he oversees, he never discusses climate change.

“There have been naysayers about that particular topic,” the transportation director of the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission said last week. He has better luck talking about more frequent hurricanes and floods, rather than what might be causing them. “You really have to think about it in terms of extreme weather events,” he said.

Harrison’s burden shows the difficulty America faces in adapting for global warming, which last week’s National Climate Assessment said is being felt from Alaska to New York. According to the report, rising seas may devastate communities such as Mobile, a three-century-old port city in a state where Republicans dominate all branches of government.

Even as politicians and the official Alabama climatologist say global warming is a sham, there’s no dispute that Mobile’s fate is tied inextricably to the bay whose waters lap near streets with names like Dauphin and Conception, reminders of 18th-century French colonists. In coming decades, its port, which serves steel producer ThyssenKrupp AG and Kleenex maker Kimberly-Clark Corp., would be swamped by the rising Mobile Bay under as much as 25 feet of water, according to federal studies.

Warming Warning

Policy makers need to “realize that this is a potential threat,” said Harrison, 44, who safeguards a fragile web of infrastructure binding a three-county community of 650,000 arrayed along beaches, bayous and bays.

“Whether the state adheres to our warnings or not, that’s going to be up to the state,” he said. “That’s about all we can do.”

Alabama, which the U.S. Census Bureau says is the nation’s seventh-poorest state, is especially exposed because of the role that manufacturing plays in its economy. Mobile’s port facilities support more than 127,000 jobs, many at companies such as shipbuilder Austal Ltd. and jetmaker Airbus SAS, according to the Alabama State Port Authority. Cargo cranes dominate the skyline in downtown Mobile, where antebellum mansions and manicured parks lie in flood plains.

Researchers with the U.S. Transportation Department are performing a case study of the area that’s set to be completed this year to document the cost of inaction for highways, rail lines and pipelines.

Underwater Port

Among the data already released are maps that forecast sea-level rise and storm surge. Areas including Dauphin Island, a beachfront vacation town, and the port are shaded in deep red. The color reflects a high potential that waist-deep water will flow there more frequently over the next 85 years.

“Several assets are highly vulnerable to multiple climate stressors,” the study found. The port areas flooded in almost every scenario. About five miles away, the plant where Airbus is building A320 jets is also vulnerable to storm surges, Harrison said.

The state must fortify its facilities and consider climate change as it pursues infrastructure projects, Harrison said. While Harrison hasn’t yet determined a price tag, he’s planning to add millions of dollars to his budget request next year.

Whether it’s fulfilled is up to Alabama legislators, including state Senator Trip Pittman, a Republican who represents Baldwin County on the east side of Mobile Bay.

Costly Crusade

Pittman, whose district is also dyed red on the map, called federal research on climate change “bad science” and “fear-mongering.” Spending millions based on such predictions doesn’t make sense, he said.

Alabama was among 12 states that had done nothing to address climate change, according to an April 2012 report by the Natural Resources Defense Council, a New York-based nonprofit that supports environmental conservation.

A month later, the Alabama legislature passed a law banning local governments from adopting the United Nations’ environmental sustainability program, called Agenda 21.

“What are the costs of us going on these crusades, these environmental crusades?” said Pittman. “We’ve elevated environmentalism into some kind of religion.”

As chairman of the Senate’s education budget committee, Pittman directed extra money to the University of Alabama in Huntsville to fund research by John Christy, who has testified before Congress denouncing claims of man-made climate change.

No Sweat

More than 97 percent of climate scientists agree that global warming caused by human activity is real, according to a study published last year by the journal *Environmental Research Letters*.

Christy, Alabama’s official climatologist, said he tells lawmakers the situation isn’t worth fretting over.

“We count the tornadoes, we count hurricanes,” he said. “None of those are increasing. Floods are not increasing.”

President Barack Obama has sought unsuccessfully to persuade Congress to regulate carbon pollution, the main driver of global warming, according to the national assessment. Jeff Sessions, a Republican U.S. senator from Mobile, has accused the president and Democrats of misleading the public.

Sessions, a member of the Environment and Public Works Committee, has cited research, including Christy's, that he says rebuts claims that tornadoes and temperatures are increasing due to global warming.

'Debunked Claims'

"The evidence is overwhelming: there has not been an increase in extreme weather events," Stephen Miller, a spokesman for Sessions, said today in an e-mailed statement. "And yet the president wishes to impoverish millions of struggling Americans with new sweeping anti-energy regulations. Bloomberg should spend less time publishing debunked claims, and more time reporting on the plight facing American workers."

Even as Alabama politicians question the existence of climate change, reality is unavoidable, said Ben Raines, director of Weeks Bay Foundation, a conservation group in Baldwin County.

"People here are already dealing with a more extreme climate and with sea levels that are on the rise inundating properties more and more frequently," said Raines, citing flash flooding and tornadoes that ravaged parts of the state last month. Politicians "are just going to have to deal with it, whether they like to or not."

Hanging On

Tricia Kerr, who for 30 years has lived on Dauphin Island, a mile-wide strip of land between the Gulf of Mexico and Mobile Bay, said climate change "scares the heck out of me."

"Flooding has gotten worse," she said on May 10 while working the register at the Sand Box, a gift shop she owns. "And the island doesn't drain very well. The island is saturated."

The Transportation Department study said surge from future hurricanes will submerge "nearly all" of the barrier island, where residents reach houses on stilts by a single two-lane road a few feet above sea level.

About 50 miles east, flooding last month washed out roads in Perdido Beach. Mayor Patsy Parker, 74, said she's starting to believe climate change is responsible for recent weather anomalies in her community of 598 residents.

“I have never ever seen an event like we had last week,” she said of the rainfall that produced a storm surge of about six feet. “We have to pay attention now.”

Like Harrison, she said persuading lawmakers to spend money to prepare is the biggest challenge.

Harrison said he will ask lawmakers to consider fortifying an inland bridge that stretches over Montlimar Creek in Mobile, after the Transportation Department study flagged it as vulnerable.

He doubts lawmakers will approve it.

“Are they going to spend the extra probably \$10 million to improve that bridge?” Harrison said. “I don’t think so.”

Pittman, the state senator, agrees.

“We’re limited-government people in Alabama,” he said. “People understand the reality and cost and consequences of bad policy.”

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