

Global warming would flood Bergen County by 2100

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Prominent NASA Scientist Warns of Danger in Paramus Appearance

Bergen Record

NASA scientist has chilling global warming tale

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By ALEX NUSSBAUM

STAFF WRITER

The Earth is fast approaching a global warming "point of no return," a tipping point that could lead to lifeless poles and inundated coasts -- and even floodwaters that reach Ridgewood and Tenafly, a top NASA scientist warned Friday.

James Hansen, the physicist whose clashes with the White House have made national headlines, warned a crowd of more than 300 in Paramus that the planet was already feeling the effects of overheating, though he said it still wasn't too late to avoid a crisis.

"Up until now, you could say we still didn't understand what we were doing when we emitted these gases," Hansen told a packed conference room at Bergen Community College in Paramus. "That's no longer true."

If the trend isn't reversed, he said, "there's no court of international opinion that will forgive us."

The longtime Ridgewood resident also touched on the controversy that has swirled around him in recent months, ever since he went public with complaints that the Bush administration was trying to muzzle him because it didn't like his warnings about climate change.

"In my more than 30 years in the government, I've never seen such constraints over communications between scientists and the public," he said.

"The whole idea of democracy is that decisions are to be made by the public through their representatives. How can the public elect their representatives and advise their representatives if they don't have the full and honest information?"

Hansen used an array of graphs and charts and arcane statistics to impart his message, but one slide of Bergen County may have delivered it more clearly: It showed the county in 2100 if temperatures continue rising at present rates.

The county would be flooded through much of its midsection by the Hackensack River, whose level would be raised by rising ocean levels fed by melting polar ice.

Most scientists now agree that humanity is warming the earth's atmosphere, through emissions of carbon dioxide and other industrial pollutants.

No one is sure how that will affect the planet, but many experts fear it could spark longer droughts, more destructive hurricanes and problems for countless plant and animal species. A report by a Princeton University scientist last fall warned that rising sea levels could swamp the Jersey Shore and flood-prone areas in North Jersey, permanently inundating 1 percent to 3 percent of the state by century's end.

Hansen, the head of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies in Manhattan, has been one of the country's most outspoken scientists on the issue.

In the late 1980s, his congressional testimony -- following a series of sweltering summers -- put global warming in the national spotlight. He protested publicly when the first Bush administration tried to edit his words to soften the warning.

In January, Hansen said the second Bush White House was trying to stop him from speaking out after he gave a lecture last year calling for quick reductions in greenhouse gases. The White House says it believes human-caused warming is occurring, but it supports voluntary efforts to slow the increase in emissions, rather than the mandatory cuts that others want.

Political appointees said any future lectures, papers or media interviews with Hansen would have to be pre-screened and warned of "dire consequences" if his public comments didn't stay in line with administration policy, the scientist said.

Soon after, NASA colleagues and researchers at other agencies came forward with similar claims of censorship.

The controversy prompted the space agency's director to issue a memo, warning public affairs officers not to "alter, filter or adjust engineering or scientific material." One of those public affairs staffers, a 24-year-old White House appointee who had been keeping tabs on Hansen, resigned after he admitted to fudging his resume.

The White House and NASA did not return calls seeking comment Friday.

But at a congressional hearing last month, an assistant NASA administrator defended the agency's media strategy.

"I wouldn't want anyone's political agenda to be associated with NASA publications," David Mould said, according to The New York Times.