

Congress Urged to Fight Global Warming

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Chairman Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) of the Senate Agriculture Committee, warned by experts that a global warming trend may devastate American forests and spoil vast areas of cropland, called Thursday for early action by Congress to minimize the impact.

"If we do nothing, many soybean farmers in the Southeast could be out of business," Leahy said, citing possible consequences of the rising temperatures. "If we do nothing, warming could drive the sugar maple right out of Vermont, which would be a catastrophe for my state."

"There is a need for prompt steps to reduce emissions of heat-trapping gases, especially carbon dioxide," [John Firor] said. "Your automobile, if it is an average American car, places 4 tons of carbon dioxide in the air each year."

FULL TEXT

Chairman Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) of the Senate Agriculture Committee, warned by experts that a global warming trend may devastate American forests and spoil vast areas of cropland, called Thursday for early action by Congress to minimize the impact.

Government and private scientists testified at a Senate hearing that a hotter planet could make irreversible changes in farming and forestry in 60 to 100 years if current trends continue.

The Environmental Protection Agency said in a new draft report that rising ocean levels, lower rainfall and dying out of tree species may be widespread by the year 2050 if the amount of carbon dioxide emissions continues to increase at the current rate.

"If we do nothing, many soybean farmers in the Southeast could be out of business," Leahy said, citing possible consequences of the rising temperatures. "If we do nothing, warming could drive the sugar maple right out of Vermont, which would be a catastrophe for my state."

In its report to Congress, the EPA gave a dire forecast on the impact of the warming trend, saying: "The landscape of North America will change in ways that cannot be fully predicted. The ultimate effects will last for centuries and will be irreversible.

"Strategies to reverse such impacts on natural ecosystems are not currently available."

It said that climatic zones may shift hundreds of miles northward, while animals and especially plants may have difficulty migrating at the same speed. Forest declines may be visible in as little as a few decades, the EPA concluded, perhaps wiping out sugar maple and hemlock trees in the lower 48 states.

Leahy said he convened the unusual December hearing to get experts' views in hopes that it might stimulate Congress to consider and adopt measures next year to counter or limit the impact of the so-called greenhouse effect on U.S. farms and forests.

"Congress can't seem to make up its mind about whether it wants a two-year budget, let alone focus on the effects of global warming which may not occur for several decades," Leahy said.

"But there is too much at stake to let our normal cynicism-or realism-about congressional leadership hold sway. It is our job to worry about the long-term future of American agriculture and forestry."

Linda J. Fisher, assistant EPA administrator, said scientists are uncertain about how rapidly additional heat will be absorbed by the oceans and about possible effects of cloud formation.

"Generally, scientists assume that current trends in emissions will continue and that climate will change gradually over the next century, although at a much faster pace than historically," she said.

"Some scientists have indicated that the impact of global warming may be felt as soon as the next decade, but the full effect of the equivalent doubling of carbon dioxide probably would not be experienced until after 2050."

Another expert, Dr. John Firor of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, cited some possible impacts:

-The Midwest, heart of the grain-growing area, will have less soil moisture during the growing season.

-Increased evaporation that will accompany higher temperatures could decrease the average flow in some river basins.

-A global rise in sea level-averaging two inches a decade or more.

"There is a need for prompt steps to reduce emissions of heat-trapping gases, especially carbon dioxide," Firor said. "Your automobile, if it is an average American car, places 4 tons of carbon dioxide in the air each year."

The EPA report indicated that long-range effects would go far beyond farms and forests, however, as a special study on California showed.

"Climate change may lead to particular problems with water resources in California," the report said. With less snowpack and more rain in winter months, water runoff from mountains around the Central Valley would increase at that time and be lower in the spring and summer, the study said.

"The current reservoir system does not have the capacity to store more winter runoff and still to provide adequate flood protection," the report noted, thus forcing release of much of the earlier winter runoff.

DETAILS

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