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Report: Climate shift to hit Indians hard

Droughts could set off water wars among Southwest tribes, and rising seas may flood Indian lands in Florida and Alaska, the study says.

By Katy Human
Denver Post Staff Writer

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Climate change likely will hit American Indians especially hard as rising seas flood Miccosukee and Seminole lands in Florida and droughts trigger water wars between Southwestern tribes and others, according to a new report.

Among the hardest hit will be Alaska's native people, University of Colorado at Boulder law professors and scientists said Monday in the report.

The study - "Native Communities and Climate Change, Protecting Tribal Resources as Part of National Climate Policy" - has been sent to members of the U.S. Congress.

Climate change is already eroding the northern permafrost under homes and melting sea ice, leaving coastal towns - mostly inhabited by Native Alaskans - vulnerable to storm surges and high waves.

"Lawmakers will be poorly served if they overlook this population," said Sarah Krakoff, a CU law professor and co-author of the study. She and her colleagues urged Congress to help tribes adapt.

The Navajo Nation has already been involved in climate-change discussions, said Steven Etsitty, director of the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency.

The tribe has been working closely with the U.S. EPA, Etsitty said, on making sure Native Americans have a seat at the table when the EPA is developing climate policies.

"We've been left out in a number of other major initiatives," Etsitty said. "This is another important one, and we want to be involved."

Although many anticipated climate changes are likely to hurt Native Americans, co-author Mark Squillace said, some will be well positioned to take advantage of policy changes.

"Particularly the tribes in the Southwest, they have a great deal of potential in wind and solar-energy development," said Squillace, director of the Natural Resources Law Center at CU-Boulder. "If the federal government wakes up, they could jump-start an alternative-energy program on the Navajo or other reservation."

And many tribes also have powerful water rights, Krakoff said, rights that she said may be challenged.

"In the real world what has happened is that when push comes to shove and resources become more scarce, their powerful legal right evaporates," Krakoff said.

That could open the door to tense litigation and expensive legal bills, she said, so the government

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should begin making plans and talking with tribes.

There are also equity issues, Squillace said.

"In almost every case, the tribes are contributing relatively little to the causes of climate change, but they're sharing more of the burden," he said.

Staff writer Katy Human can be reached at 303-954-1910 or khuman@denverpost.com.

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