



Concluding Thoughts

Responding to changing conditions

Human-induced climate change is happening now, and impacts are already apparent. Greater impacts are projected, particularly if heat-trapping gas emissions continue unabated. Previous assessments have established these facts, and this report confirms, solidifies, and extends these conclusions for the United States. It reports the latest understanding of how climate change is already affecting important sectors and regions. In particular, it reports that some climate change impacts appear to be increasing faster than previous assessments had suggested. This report represents a significant update to previous work, as it draws from the U.S. Climate Change Science Program's Synthesis and Assessment Products and other recent studies that examine how climate change and its effects are projected to continue to increase over this century and beyond.

Climate choices

Choices about emissions now and in the coming years will have far-reaching consequences for climate change impacts. A consistent finding of this assessment is that the rate and magnitude of future climate change and resulting impacts depend critically on the level of global atmospheric heat-trapping gas concentrations as well as the types and concentrations of atmospheric particles (aerosols). Lower emissions of heat-trapping gases will delay the appearance of climate change impacts and lessen their magnitude. Unless the rate of emissions is substantially reduced, impacts are expected to become increasingly severe for more people and places.

Similarly, there are choices to be made about adaptation strategies that can help to reduce or avoid some of the undesirable impacts of climate change. There is much to learn about the effectiveness of the various types of adaptation responses and how they will interact with each other and with mitigation actions.

Responses to the climate change challenge will almost certainly evolve over time as society learns by doing. Determining and refining societal responses will be an iterative process involving scientists, policymakers, and public and private decision makers at all levels. Implementing these response strategies will require careful planning and continual feedback on the impacts of mitigation and adaptation policies for government, industry, and society.

The value of assessments

Science has revolutionized our ability to observe and model the Earth's climate and living systems, to understand how they are changing, and to project future changes in ways that were not possible in prior generations. These advances have enabled the assessment of climate change, impacts, vulnerabilities, and response strategies. Assessments serve a very important function in providing the scientific underpinnings of informed policy. They can identify advances in the underlying science, provide critical analysis of issues, and highlight key findings and key unknowns that can guide decision making. Regular assessments also serve as progress reports to evaluate and improve policy making and other types of decision making related to climate change.

Impacts and adaptation research includes complex human dimensions, such as economics, management, governance, behavior, and equity. Comprehensive assessments provide an opportunity to evaluate the social implications of climate change within the context of larger questions of how communities and the nation as a whole create sustainable and environmentally sound development paths.

A vision for future U.S. assessments

Over the past decade, U.S. federal agencies have undertaken two coordinated, national-scale efforts to evaluate the impacts of global climate change on this country. Each effort produced a report to the nation – *Climate Change Impacts on the United States*, published in 2000, and this report, *Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States*, published in 2009. A unique feature of the first report was that in addition to reporting the current state of the science, it created a national discourse on climate change that involved hundreds of scientists and thousands of stakeholders including

farmers, ranchers, resource managers, city planners, business people, and local and regional government officials. A notable feature of the second report is the incorporation of information from the 21 topic-specific Synthesis and Assessment Products, many motivated by stakeholder interactions.

A vision for future climate change assessments includes both sustained, extensive stakeholder involvement, and targeted, scientifically rigorous reports that address concerns in a timely fashion. The value of stakeholder involvement includes helping scientists understand what information society wants and needs. In addition, the problem-solving abilities of stakeholders will be essential to designing, initiating, and evaluating mitigation and adaptation strategies and their interactions. The best decisions about these strategies will come when there is widespread understanding of the complex issue of climate change – the science and its many implications for our nation.

