

## ***Communicating About Climate Disruption in Tillamook County***

*Prepared by Climate Access for the Geos Institute*

*July 2017*

On behalf of the Geos Institute, Climate Access conducted interviews with eight stakeholders in Tillamook County to help inform communication and outreach efforts in support of the Tillamook Estuaries Partnership's Vulnerability Assessment and Adaptation Strategy Plan. Interviewees came from a range of sectors: dairy, forestry, agriculture, water management and conservation, emergency management, forest and parks management, fish habitat specialists, and others. The following recommendations reflect key findings from those stakeholder conversations as well as best practices in climate communication drawn from Climate Access ([www.climateaccess.org](http://www.climateaccess.org)).

### **OVERVIEW**

Engaging decision makers and community members early and often in climate adaptation efforts ensures plans are sensitive to stakeholder needs including those most at risk, and helps develop buy-in for implementation. Tapping local knowledge can provide detailed insights on how climate change is impacting a community beyond what climate models reveal and can generate innovative response ideas. Effective outreach increases issue understanding and relevance, which is critical given climate change is a low priority for most and remains politically polarized across the country and in Tillamook County.

### **FRAMING RECOMMENDATIONS**

Framing the need for climate adaptation is about clarifying what's at stake, what can be done and the benefits of taking action. Some stakeholders want and need to gain a detailed understanding of climate data and vulnerability trends however the vast majority is looking for this higher-level value proposition. Focusing on impacts that are most relevant to target audiences (i.e. the types of groups interviewed for this strategy) is essential; while sea level rise is a key concern for coastal communities in the watershed, inland impacts related to river flooding and major storms are equally important and perhaps less well-understood in terms of their connection to climate change, according to some interviewees. Translating impacts into tangible risks – such as threats to water quality or fish habitat – are also critical.

#### **Consider Preparation**

Climate adaptation is a vague concept to most and implies a natural, gradual process. Using the term preparation in place of adaptation has tested well and many practitioners have successfully adopted its use, particularly in contexts where using the term climate change is problematic as it can be modified based on context such as preparing for changing in the growing seasons, more extreme storms, etc. (<https://climateaccess.org/resource/preparation-frame>). Stakeholders warned, however, to be cautious about telling people what to expect or what specifically they need to be preparing for. If it doesn't materialize, it can breed intense skepticism. This points to the need to engage audiences in a process of exploring risk and response options (see below) as opposed to prescribing what the future will look like.

### **Focus on Common Values**

As the Tillamook Estuaries Partnership moves its adaptation planning effort forward, it is important to tailor framing approaches based on the values, concerns and needs of key stakeholders. Some may be concerned or motivated by economic risks and opportunities, while others are interested in health or stewardship. Open conversation based on common values and connect to climate disruption over time. ***Don't lead with climate change unless you know the issue is already a priority.*** Most interviewees indicated that stakeholders have a shared a value around being good stewards and, with a common understanding of and agreement around the end goal, can play a key role in figuring out how to get there.

### **Position Climate Disruption as a Here-Now-Us Issue**

Most people in Tillamook County accept global warming exists and are concerned; yet it is not perceived as being a current and personal risk to most (<http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us-2016/>). This trend was echoed in the interviews conducted for this report and in particular, there is a sense that the county is not being impacted to the same extent as other parts of the county and therefore immediate action is not required. At the same time, climate change is causing disruptions being noticed by farmers, fishers, foresters, and others. The adaptation plan and related communication should emphasize ***near-term risks*** and provide examples of sectors, communities, and individuals being impacted, articulating key differences between them; for example, forestry crops are much more resilient than agricultural ones and therefore face different threats.

Extreme weather events are also not new to Tillamook County and can result in a discounting or not relating current trends to climate change. One way to overcome this barrier is to point to trends in the past and how they differ from what is being experienced today versus focusing on future climate projections. For example, “we may be used to major storm events but what we’re experiencing now is more extreme and frequent than in the past.” Those who are new to or visiting the community may lack a realistic understanding of what’s at risk, for example, in the middle of winter when roads flood and electricity goes out for 2-3 days. Given the dynamic nature of the population due to tourism or vacation home ownership, there is a need to consider an ongoing cycle of engagement that continually educates businesses, homeowners and visitors on the issues.

### **Balance the Threat with What’s Possible**

Most climate communication fails by overwhelming people with the threat and not illustrating a pathway forward. Effective framing has to include a ***challenge*** (what’s at stake) to motivate yet the challenge needs to be balanced by offering a ***choice*** (what can be done), and an ***opportunity*** (the benefits of taking action). The interviews confirmed many stakeholders in Tillamook County accept there is a problem and in some cases are already experiencing impacts, yet lack clarity on the steps they should be taking. Many commented on the need to focus on actions that can be taken, and gained from, in the short-term. Issues that look too far into the future, for example, slow-changing pest populations and the impact on agricultural producers, leaves space for stakeholders to deprioritize action in the face of more pressing concerns, such as declining access to water for irrigation.

## **ENGAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Co-Explore Risks and Responses**

Risks better understood and responses acted on when they are co-explored and developed rather than prescribed. This is particularly true with climate disruption where impacts can be overwhelming; and vulnerabilities, timelines, and solutions uncertain. Dialogues, community mapping exercises, and participatory design sessions are some of the approaches that can be used to increase issue understanding and urgency, tap local knowledge, and generate planning ideas. Pilot programs, such as those already run through the TEP and dairymen, are key for testing resiliency approaches, where partners can share costs and participate in demonstration projects that show the value of this work to related stakeholders. Giving stakeholders the opportunity to experiment and innovate to identify better management practices motivates those who want to establish themselves as industry leaders, save money, or get out in front of potential regulatory changes. (This connects back to the idea that leading with a stakeholder's core concerns or values is most effective.)

### **Provide Decision Support Tools**

Many stakeholders in Tillamook County would like to see climate trends distilled and translated in terms of expected impacts on different sectors and communities. This includes creating targeted, issue-specific materials that relate to the interests and needs of a specific audience, and don't require them to wade through pages of information to find what is most relevant to them. Developing content that is optimized for different channels, from social media to printed pamphlets, is also critical.

Additionally, there is a need for guidance on how to make decisions in light of the current and future changing conditions and desire for flexibility in how outcomes are achieved. Support is also needed on how to plan based on different timelines as some stakeholders have near term horizons while also are looking at asset or resource management 50 – 60 years into the future.

### **The Messenger Matters**

The messenger matters, particularly on climate issues given political polarization, climate fatalism, and the role social networks and norms play in shaping opinion and behavior.

Promote peer-to-peer outreach by identifying organizational, sector and community leaders who might be willing to play in the planning efforts and act as a project ambassador within their networks. For example, reach out to and partner with organizations such as farm cooperatives, water utilities, and nonprofit organizations; and look for opportunities to present on climate adaptation via venues such as the Oregon Emergency Manager Association conference. Other suggested venues, individuals or organizations that could be involved in this work, either to explore risk or share out findings within their stakeholder network, include:

- Ocean Policy Advisory Council
- Watershed councils
- Private landowners and organizations that represent them
- Stewardship groups (Hebo, etc.)
- Environmental organizations (Audubon Society, Oregon Wild, Native Fish Society, Trout Unlimited, etc.)
- Soil and water conservation district employees
- Oregon Emergency Management Association
- Public Works Association
- County commissioner and city managers conference (happens annually via an overarching organization)

### **Overcome Silos**

Implementing an adaptation plan will require overcoming organizational and jurisdictional silos. Despite demanding schedules, there is recognition that improving collaboration across the region is an important part of the planning process and stakeholder interest in coming together to share updates on adaptation efforts and best practices with an emphasis on learning rather than advocacy. Engaging across departments and entities also presents unique partnership opportunities that can help reach new stakeholders. For example, the Forest Service suggested it has resources (funds) that can be made available to landowners who are willing to invite a watershed council onto their property to assess culverts, which presents an opportunity to help engage these people on climate impacts and resiliency. Meanwhile, existing partnerships like the Salmon Superhwy Project can provide access to a diverse group of stakeholders that are already engaged in cross-interest planning (i.e. dairy farmers and fish habitat conservation groups) and working together to address shared concerns, for example around transportation infrastructure.