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Note: Terry Chapin's name is misspelled in the fourth paragraph of this article. The correct spelling is as above.

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Alaska researchers, policymakers seek cooperation on climate issues

By Christi Hang

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FAIRBANKS -- Getting researchers and policymakers to collaborate might not be a snap, but one organization is trying to bridge the gap.

The mission of SNAP — Scenarios Network for Alaska Planning — is to provide information about climate, ecological and economic change to policymakers. It is a network of organizations from the university, state and federal levels, local agencies, non-governmental organizations and industry partners.

SNAP director Scott Rupp was part of a climate impacts panel that met with Gov. Sarah Palin's cabinet Tuesday at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Cabinet members also heard from an energy panel and a health and life science panel.

Rupp was joined by Matthew Sturm, David Atkinson, Yuri Shur and Terry Chaplin for the climate impacts panel. The five researchers covered different aspects of climate change in Alaska, but the theme that connected their presentation was the openness of researchers to share their findings.

"Alaska researchers are ready, willing and able to partner with the state," said Sturm, a senior researcher with the U.S Army Cold Regions Laboratory in Alaska.

The panel members talked about Alaska being at the forefront of issues such as changes in permafrost and the shrinking sea ice.

Both land and sea are undergoing climate change and although sea ice changes the most and receives the coverage, it doesn't mean land changes are any less important, Sturm said. Changes on land are harder to track but affect whole ecosystems.

Atkinson, an assistant professor of atmospheric sciences, also discussed sea ice change. He said the amount of sea ice varied strongly from year to year and region to region. The lowest amount of sea ice was recorded in 2007. Although there was an increase in sea ice this year, Atkinson said that in recent years, the actual amounts of sea ice have been below projections.

Projection technology was another topic addressed by the researchers. Sturm and Atkinson said present-day technology was used to make the predictions but the future would bring better predictions.

"They will improve but this is what we have now," Atkinson said.

Shur, an engineering professor, spelled out what the loss of permafrost would mean for the state. Thawing permafrost will affect oil infrastructure in the northern parts of the state that depend on the stability of the ice they were built on.

Shur emphasized the need for funding for climate change work, a sentiment echoed by Sturm. Sturm said finding answers is a long-term process that would take time and

money.

Chaplin, a professor at the Institute of Arctic Biology at UAF, emphasized linking research to state needs. Researchers are making their work more relevant by linking society and environment, Chaplin said. The risks also link society and environment. For example, the retreat of sea ice means mammals and communities who depend on the sea ice are now at risk.

University of Alaska President Mark Hamilton said SNAP could be the link between science and policy. He told the cabinet SNAP was made for them to use because researchers and scientists can't make policy. Rupp said SNAP is there to help policymakers make the correct decisions.

Hamilton compared Alaska and climate change to the canary in coal mine. He said the problem is real and Alaska is on the forefront of it, which means the cabinet has to be ahead of curve when it comes to making decisions and policies.

"You can't pass this on the next administration or the next generation," he said.

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