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Climate Change Hurts Indian Tribes Disproportionately, Report Finds

*Droughts, water scarcity, fires, flooding, snowstorms are especially harsh for
American Indians and Alaska Natives*

Washington, DC (August 3, 2011) – North American Indian Tribes are especially harmed by climate change, as more ecological shifts and more frequent, more extreme weather events occur, a new study concludes. Because Tribes are heavily dependent on natural resources, severe weather events like droughts, floods, wildfires, and snowstorms make tribal communities particularly vulnerable and impact American Indians and Alaska Natives more than they impact the general population.

“Extreme weather events can be very destructive for Tribes, many of whom are already suffering from lack of resources to begin with,” said [Dr. Amanda Staudt](#), senior scientist, National Wildlife Federation. “Heat waves and droughts can exacerbate plant and wildlife mortality, heighten the risk of wildfires and habitat loss, and compromise tribal lands.”

“Power disruptions from storms, long dry spells and heavy floods can be difficult to recover from, especially for people who live close to the land and have limited economic resources,” said Garrit Voggeser, senior manager, [National Wildlife Federation Tribal Lands Program](#).

In collaboration with the Tribal Lands Program, [Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals](#), [National Congress of American Indians](#), [Native American Fish & Wildlife Society](#), [National Tribal Environmental Council](#), [Native American Rights Fund](#), and [University of Colorado Law School](#), the National Wildlife Federation released [Indian Tribes, Climate-Induced Weather Extremes, and the Future for Indian Country](#). The report details how climate change is adversely and disproportionately affecting Indian Tribes in North America, people who rely on a healthy environment to sustain their economic, cultural and spiritual lives.

“The Indian Nations face profound challenges to their cultures, economies and livelihoods, because of climate change,” said Jose Aguto, policy advisor on Climate Change for the National Congress of American Indians. “Yet tribal peoples possess valuable knowledge and practices of their ecosystems that are resilient and cost-effective methods to address climate change impacts, for the benefit of all peoples. This study is a clear call for the Administration, Congress, state and local governments, and all peoples,

to support and join tribal efforts to stem climate change.”

The study describes how the increase in average temperature is leading to more severe weather events more often and the effects which these events have:

- Extreme droughts weaken trees’ ability to resist pests and to curb erosion and siltation. On the nation’s 326 reservations, there are approximately 18.6 million forested acres. Droughts also lower water levels and impair agricultural productivity.
- Water scarcity in the West further complicates Tribes’ unresolved water rights claims.
- Wildfires pose acute risks to human health, ecosystems, and property. Because springs are warmer and summers drier, wildfires have increased four-fold since the mid-1980s, the fire season is 78 days longer and individual fires are 30 days longer, studies show.
- Flooding from heavy rain, snowmelt, melting sea ice, and rising sea levels destroys homes, buildings, and infrastructure and can increase diseases and parasites. Two [U.S. General Accountability Office](#) studies found that more than 200 Alaska Native villages have been impacted by flooding and erosion and 31 villages should consider relocating because of imminent threats. Recovery costs can be insurmountable for Tribes.
- Some areas like the upper Midwest and Northeast will see more record-breaking, intense snowstorms that can paralyze communities and damage homes and infrastructure.
- Climate change is breaking down natural mechanisms that help wildlife and habitat survive weather variations. The [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) has projected significant loss of stream habitat for trout and salmon, for example.

The study asks Congress to increase funding for the [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#)’ efforts to address conservation and climate adaptation, to provide equitable tribal access to federal funds and to repeal Tribes’ exclusions from federal environmental programs. It also stresses the need for the federal government to enforce tribal rights to natural and cultural resources. Finally, the study calls on Tribes to include climate impacts in their planning efforts and to use their sovereign authority and knowledge to address climate change and its impacts.

“More than many other peoples, native peoples understand the importance of robust natural systems,” said Kim Gottschalk, staff attorney, Native American Rights Fund. “All of us must act to prohibit the disproportionate harm to Native Americans brought on by climate change.”

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